# CONSTRUCTION OF BENGALI MUSLIM IDENTITY IN COLONIAL BENGAL, c. 1870-1920.

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**ABSTRACT**

Zaheer Abbas: Construction of Bengali Muslim Identity in Colonial Bengal, c. 1870-1920

(Under the direction of Yasmin Saikia)

This thesis explores the various discourses on the formation of Bengali Muslim identity in colonial Bengal until 1920s before it becomes hardened and used in various politically mobilizable forms. For the purpose of this thesis, I engage multiple articulations of the Bengali Muslim identity to show the fluctuating representations of what and who qualifies as Bengali Muslim in the period from 1870 to 1920. I critically engage with new knowledge production that the colonial census undertook, the different forms of non-fictional Bengali literature produced by the vibrant vernacular print industry, and the views of the English-educated Urdu speaking elites of Bengal from which can be read the ensemble of forces acting upon the formation of a Bengali Muslim identity. I argue that while print played an important role in developing an incipient awareness among Bengali Muslims, the developments and processes of identity formulations varied in different sites thereby producing new nuances on Bengali Muslim identity.

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**Chapter**

## Introduction

This thesis is an inquiry into the formation of Bengali Muslim identity in colonial Bengal in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century focusing on the period from 1870 to 1920. I interrogate the multiple processes through which the Bengali Muslim identity was *produced* and *reified* during this period making it possible over time to deploy it in various politically mobilizable forms. I would argue, however, that in the late nineteenth century, up until the second decade of the twentieth century, the discourse on a unified shared sense of Bengali Muslim identity was not clearly formulated and developed. The social and political terrain of what it meant to be a Bengali Muslim remained even in the 1920s a highly contested and fluid one, where different groups aspiring to leadership in the Bengal public sphere claimed to represent the Bengali Muslims and created their own definitions to suit specific class-based audiences. The fluid terrain of Bengali Muslim identity took a decisive turn in the wake of new constitutional reforms in the 1920s.[1] Under the reforms, provincial legislatures constituted at the end of 1920 were responsible for local governance and answerable to a substantially enlarged electorate. Increased elected representatives in government offices,

[1] The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1918, which finally took the form of Government of India Act, 1919, had a deep impact in the politicization of community identity and hardening of religious boundaries. The reforms proposed more Indian representatives in the services, territorial representation, and the introduction of diarchy in the provinces. For a detailed discussion of the Montagu-Chelmsford reform, see Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal: 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 235-246.

provided a new structural definition of Muslim community. A "bureaucratically fixed frame for Muslim community definition"[2] emerged and this seemed to be in sharp contrast to the public debates on Bengali culture and language that appeared in print (mostly before 1920). The colonial reforms resulted in creating the "image of a common Muslim identity, fixed by state definition,"[3] and in the charged political climate of the 1920s, Bengali Muslim identity came to be defined through political categories along religious lines. Although, I am interested in the new turn in Bengali Muslim identity, in this thesis I mainly focus on the period before 1920s to probe and understand the fluidity of Bengali identity and the gradual hardening of boundaries over time, that developed after 1920.

Throughout this thesis, I engage multiple articulations of the Bengali Muslim identity to show the fluctuating representations of what and who qualifies as Bengali Muslim in the period from 1870 to 1920. I begin with an exploration of the historical transformations that occurred in the late nineteenth century when new techniques of colonial administration were deployed to measure, quantify and "understand" the colonial society. By specifically looking into the colonial census, I seek to trace the ways in which such techniques of colonial information gathering impacted the instantiation of a Muslim identity in Bengal. Then I move on to study the ways in which different groups like the rural clergy, the emergent Bengali Muslim literati and the English-educated Urdu-speaking elites sought to define the form and content of a Muslim identity in Bengal. In so doing, my thesis dialogues with Benedict Anderson's veritable scholarship on the role

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[2] David Gilmartin Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4 (Nov., 1998), 1079.

[3] Ibid., 1079.

of print culture in the context of modern imaginations like the nation and sub-national communities. According to Anderson's influential thesis, print-capitalism was the chief vehicle in giving shape to the political community of the nation.[4] But his emphasis on the role of print in creating 'horizontal comradeship' needs to be revisited in the South Asian context.[5] Contrary to Anderson's assertions on the homogenizing role of print, I show through my investigation of vernacular and English press how the proliferation of print created multiple visions of a community leading to an internally differentiated public sphere. Thus, I argue that while print played an important role in developing an incipient awareness among Bengali Muslims, the developments and processes of identity formulations varied in different sites: in rural Bengal versus the middle class and the urban elite spaces Bengali identity was crafted differently thereby producing new nuances on Bengali Muslim identity.

**Debate on Bengali Muslim identity**

In the context of South Asia, the case of Bengal has assumed especial salience with regard to the question of Muslim identity formation. In 1871, the colonial census revealed that in the province of Bengal, Muslims were a numerical majority. Subsequently, scholars have studied how and why a dense and numerically large Muslim

[4] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Revised edition (London: Verso, 1991).

[5] See Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). Jalal argues, "the general theory about print capitalism…often misses the historical specificities and contingencies that influenced discourses on identity," (p. 49); Francesca Orsini, 'Pandits, Printers and Others: Publishing in Nineteenth-century Benares', in Abhijit Gupta and Swapan Chakravorty, ed., *Print Areas: Book History in India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004). Orsini focuses on the role of print in creating "persisting stratification and diversity," (p. 104); and C A Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Bayly emphasizes the impact of print in increasing the "velocity and range of communication among existing communities of knowledge," (p. 243).

population emerged at the frontiers of the Mughal empire (i.e. Bengal and Punjab) where, paradoxically, the Mughal state's investment in "converting" the local population was the least. Scholars have argued that the Mughal state was not only indifferent to proselytizing in Bengal, but often actively discouraged programs of Islamization.[6] They have generally attributed the spread of Islam in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the activities of non-state actors like Sufi *pirs* (Muslim mystics) who helped the population of the lower deltaic region of Bengal transition to settled agriculture and rice cultivation. According to Richard Eaton, the unique characteristic of Islam in Bengal was that it emerged as the "religion of the plough". This accounts for the predominantly peasant character of the Muslim population in Bengal.

Scholars like Rafiuddin Ahmed and Sufia Uddin who have investigated the question of Muslim identity formation in colonial Bengal have repeatedly focused on the chasm between this rural, peasant *atrap* (non-elite) majority that comprised the bulk of the Muslim population in the province and the Urdu-speaking *ashraf* (elite) who traced their descent from Persia or Arabia or to the Mughal center of power in North India. According to this body of scholarship, the Bengali Muslim identity that emerged was a predominantly non-elite, peasant-based identity whose site of formation was the Bengal countryside.[7]

As Sufia Ahmed's work shows, acting as a critical link between the Urdu-speaking *ashraf* and the non-Urdu speaking *atrap* was the Bengal Muslim literati whose

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[6] See Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[7] See Rafiuddin, Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Sufia M Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

emergence can be traced to the first two decades of the twentieth century.[8] The existing scholarship on the emergence of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia is somewhat fragmentary and unsystematic. What was distinctive about the Bengali Muslim middle class intelligentsia is that unlike the Urdu-speaking *ashraf* they did not disown the Bengali language as part of their Islamic heritage. But as Anindita Ghosh's work shows, the Bengali that was emerging in the haloed portals of the Fort William College in the early nineteenth century, as well as the late nineteenth century nationalist attempts to forge Bengali as a modern vernacular was way too Sanskritized (and Hinduized) to become the basis for a Bengali Muslim identity.[9] Bengali as a modern vernacular that was to become the basis for a Bengali Muslim identity thus became as contested terrain. The kind of Bengali that was fit for a Bengali Muslim, the precise nature of vocabulary and the related questions of what it meant to be a Bengali Muslim became a matter of intense debate in the institutional sites of Bengali Muslim journals, and in the institutional networks of presses and literary organizations. My study is an attempt to contribute to the scant existing scholarship in this direction to show that the response of the Muslim literati against the Sansritization and Hinduization of Bengali was not only limited to issues of vocabulary, but also extended to questions of literary form, genre, and aesthetics. I argue that efforts were made to consolidate a distinctively Bengali Muslim literary aesthetic that focused on a Muslim history of Bengali language and culture and thus wean away

[8] See Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal: 1884-1912* (Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1974); Ashoke Chakraborty, *Bengali Muslim Literati and the Development of Muslim Community in Bengal* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2002).

[9] See Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993); Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Muslim writers from what was considered to be a excessive influence of Hindu literary production in form and style.

At another level, what it meant to be a Muslim was also being debated in reformist tracts that were circulating in the Bengal countryside. In opening up this hitherto forgotten world of cheaply printed vernacular texts that dealt with the issues of a reformed Islam, Rafiuddin Ahmad made a major contribution to understanding the formation of Bengali Muslim identity. According to Ahmad, such tracts began circulating in the Bengal countryside in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Alongside the dialogic debate-oriented practices of the *bahas* (religious debates) and the monologic *waz mahfils* (gatherings to hear religious sermons), the tracts on reform that often appeared in the form of manuals or *nasihatnamas* (manuals of religious instructions) contributed to the formation of distinct and unified Muslim identity at the grass roots-level.[10] In Ahmed's reading, the Muslim identity in Bengal was essentially a class-based identity that transmuted into the self-consciousness of being Muslim through the waves of reformist Islamic movements that swept across the Bengal countryside in the mid-nineteenth century (Faraizi Movement) and the late nineteenth century (which focused on social reform). Ahmed, however, fails to explain why peasants responded so eagerly to the proselytization campaigns of the reformist mullahs in the villages.[11] The idea of how a class became a unified religious community still remains unexplained. Or why indeed, Islamization should be equated inevitably with communalization, or even worse, separatism, as is Ahmed's claim, is not clear. In studying the issue of Bengali Muslim

[10] Rafiuddin, Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 72-104.

[11] Sumit, Sarkar. *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 97.

community formation scholars like Ahmed see a stable community that was already extant by the first decade of the twentieth century and reads "separatism" into the consciousness of such a community. Reading seeds of "separatism" into the consciousness of early twentieth century Muslim peasants in Bengal arises from a presentist understanding of historical processes from a postcolonial, post-Partition vantage point.[12] My own research, in seeking to highlight the different and often contradictory articulations of what it meant to be a Bengali Muslim is meant to show that not only was a stable notion of what constituted the community did not exist till the 1920s, but that theoretically speaking, the assumption of "separatism" is essentially a teleological historical assumption and not tenable in studying a period when the notion of what constituted the nation and what constituted community, and the relationship between the two (nation and community) was itself being contested, debated, and forged.

P K Datta, in his more recent study, focuses on peasant improvement themes in vernacular tracts produced in the early twentieth century.[13] Instead of jumping to the easy association of equating reform/revivalism with fundamentalism, Datta shows how a specific ideology of Islamic reform could be harnessed to speak for multiple identity claims. Like Rafiuddin Ahmed's study of the nineteenth century sources, Datta reads the vernacular tracts directed to village audiences in the early twentieth century, especially the 1920s which saw the emergence of a new 'peasant improvement theme' in these tracts. The articulation of this 'improvement' ideology was sometimes along exclusivist

[12] India gained her independence from British rule on August 15, 1947. But the end of British rule also saw the birth of two new nations-India and Pakistan, which has been referred to as Partition. From the vantage point of Partition, historians have read back germs of 'Muslim Separatism' into the consciousness of a community that had scarcely began to become coherent in the political sense. History then unfolds with a telos in which Partition was, in a sense, destiny.

[13] P K Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1999).

lines (e.g.: the need to stay away from the Hindu moneylenders).[14] But as several Bengali tracts analyzed by Datta show, there remained alternative possibilities of a critique of caste discrimination in Muslim society or the call to organize along class lines against *zamindars* (landlords) in an effort to 'improve' self and community. The proliferation of local organizations called *anjumans*, which often ran on voluntary subscription, spent their money on social improvement and set up co-operative banks, can be attributed to the spread of the 'improvement' ideology. Yet, according to Datta's reading this multi-vocal terrain of possibilities through which an Islamic identity was articulated in the first two decades of the twentieth century became univocal and reoriented to an unambiguously communal formation in the 1920s when the content of Muslim identity came to be articulated via a language of distance and hatred toward the Hindus.

In tracking the articulation of Bengali Muslim identity, most often than not, historians have read it as a communal formation. This becomes a problem from the vantage point of Partition, when 'Muslim Separatism' is read into the consciousness of a community at a time when the political contours of the community were not clearly defined. Mohammad Shah in a recent article has traced the evolution of Bengali Muslim identity in the colonial period in three phases.[15] In the first phase lasting till 1911, he suggests, "Muslim leaders devoted the greatest part of their energies upon the protection of their *communal* interests and by remaining loyal to the British government."[16] He then

[14] Ibid., 76.

[15] Mohammad Shah, 'Political Evolution of the Muslims of Bengal under the British Administration', *Quarterly Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, vol. 48, no. 1 (Jan-March, 2000): 9-28.

[16] Ibid., 24. Emphasis mine. I discuss the loyalty issue in chapter 3.

reads a very short-lived inter-communal union in the second decade of twentieth century. In the third phase beginning in the 1920s and characterized by electoral reforms, Mohammad Shah sees the hardening of Muslim attitude towards the Hindus, and concludes, "hence in the 1930s and 1940s Muslim separatism became a reality."[17] Muslim separatism for him is not only the articulation of Muslim politicians or British policies, rather "it was also based on his [Bengali Muslims] separate communal identity."[18] According to him, "if the Muslims as a community did not feel separate from the Hindus, India would not have been divided on the basis of the two-nations theory, or at least Bengal and Punjab would have remained undivided."[19] Historians, like Shah, by focusing their lens on separatism foresee the transfer of power to colonial subjects in the 1920s, a good two decades before Partition became a reality.[20] He fails to read the social, political, and economic contexts that lead to Partition. The assumption here is that Muslims and Hindus belong to separate cultural spheres, which cannot be reconciled. This kind of an understanding spills over in theorizing Bengali Muslim identity, for they see a deep chasm between being a Bengali and a Muslim simultaneously.

Joya Chatterji explores the ways in which a historicization of Islam in Bengal in the pre-modern period could be productively brought to bear upon the question of the Bengali Muslims in the modern period in order to dispel certain binaries like *ashraf/atrap*, Muslim/Bengali and so on that continue to plague a large body of otherwise painstaking and excellent scholarship on the issue of Islam in Bengal. Instead of

[17] Ibid., 25.

[18] Ibid., 9.

[19] Ibid., 9.

[20] Ibid., 19.

assuming these binaries as given, a rigorous historicization of how these binaries came into being could be a very fruitful exercise. For instance, she reads Richard Eaton to show how the *ashraf*, emerged out of social and political contingencies very specific to Bengal in the Sultanate period. So *ashraf*-ism is as Bengali as the popular sorts of Islam that emerged at a later date.[21] Chatterji also adds an important corrective to the historiography of Muslim separatism. She provides for a communal reading of *bhadrolok* (educated Bengali Hindus) culture, which plays a significant role in them demanding the separation of Hindu majority provinces from the Muslim majority ones. In the process Chatterji argues that the demand for a separation was not the preserve of the Muslims, rather the *bhadrolok* discourse on national consciousness through the idiom of culture was equally culpable of it.[22]

Between the poles of Muslim and Hindu separatism, Sana Aiyar by focusing on the particularities of Muslim majority Bengal challenges the "assumption that Muslim identity was constructed as a linear progression towards a highly communal, exclusive and oppositional politics at an all-India level."[23] Her central argument is the provincial government of Bengal in the early 1940s provided a 'third alternative' that attempted to "reconcile religious and regional identification within a political discourse that was not exclusionary."[24] Her study focuses on the coalition government in Bengal, which was

[21] Joya Chatterji, 'The Bengali Muslim: A Contradiction in Terms? An Overview of the Debate on Bengali Muslim Identity', in Mushirul Hasan, ed., *Islam, Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998), 265-282.

[22] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu communalism and partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[23] Sana Aiyar, 'Fazlul Huq, Region and Religion in Bengal: The Forgotten Alternative of 1940-43', *Modern Asian Studies*, no. 42, vol. 6 (2008), 1214.

[24] Ibid., 1215.

formed on the basis of cross-communal alliance and emphasized regional solidarity, without claiming to be secular in nature. Political mobilization for the government was done in communal terms, yet it was not based in opposing the communal other, rather it called for the "recognition and reconciliation of different religious identities."[25] She refers to a section of Bengali Muslim leaders who were against Partition and voiced their opinion for an independent Bengal. The movement for an independent Bengal was based on a "cultural and regional solidarity among Bengali Muslims, who wanted to preserve their particular identity," and claimed to be culturally different from Muslims in other parts of colonial India.[26] Sana Aiyar's 'third alternative' that focuses on culture, religion, and region in defining Bengali Muslim identity, comes to its logical conclusion in 1971 with the formation of Bangladesh. It is here that such nuanced scholarship runs into problems of falling into the trope of separatism. Just like Muslim separatism has been cited as the reason for the formation of Pakistan, Aiyar's 'third alternative' is guilty of foreshadowing the emergence of Bangladesh, twenty-five years before the new nation comes into existence.[27] Also, if it was true that Bengali was the cementing factor after 1971, the Bangladeshis should have become part of unified Bengal. Rather their claim to a separate national identity became their main characteristic.

The problem with the existing scholarship is that they tend to privilege a monolithic Bengali Muslim identity whose cultural other happens to be the Bengali Hindu. In doing so it privileges religion over other available markers of identity formation. My own reading of select texts shows that an univocal articulation of a

[25] Sana Aiyar, 'Fazlul Huq, Region and Religion in Bengal', 1231.

[26] Ibid., 1239.

[27] Ibid., 1213-1215 and 1245-1246.

Muslim identity was far from the case; in defining the boundaries of a Bengali Muslim identity, the "other" was not, even in the 1920s, unequivocally determined along communal lines. The "other" was also often the British, and thus the implicit polemic was not only against Christianity but also against the ways of the colonialists that they sought to impose on a colonized population.

**Method and Scope**

My inquiry proceeds along archival lines; First I consult the census, then I look into specific kind of Islamic reformist texts dealing with the theme of peasant improvement that circulated in cheaply printed versions in the Bengal countryside, as well as into the journals and newspapers that were disseminated among a more limited and educated audience. In so doing, I pay attention not only to the differing contents of these different kinds of textual productions, but I am also attentive to the questions of form, style, and genre. For instance, the tracts circulating among the rural peasantry in the Bengal countryside used a colloquial Bengali spoken among the masses. Journals and newspapers, on the other hand, set forth the articulation of Bengali Muslim identity in more argumentative and discursive terms; they used "chaste" Bengali prose of the kind that was itself a product of colonial modernity and historically emerged out of the pressures of creating a modern, formalized vernacular fit for public discourse. Yet, the kind of Bengali prose that was deemed appropriate for use by a Muslim itself emerged as a matter of debate and contestation. It is my contention that it was at the interstices of these debates about what was 'Bengali' and what was 'Islamic' that the Bengali Muslim identity was being articulated.

The first chapter explores the ways in which the reformulation of Islam and the construction of Bengali Muslim identity served as a response to colonial apparatuses of administration, namely the census. The logic of the census to enumerate and objectify the subject population propelled people to redefine themselves in very new ways. In this chapter, I attend to the decennial census reports of colonial Bengal from 1872 to 1911, to argue that enumerative knowledge systems, in terms of categories and presuppositions that the colonial census generated, led to the formation of a Muslim identity in Bengal by creating new boundaries for purposes of self-definition while downplaying other markers of identity that were hitherto considered significant. The first chapter argues that transformative effect of the colonial census contributed to the consideration of a Muslim identity and culture as an "other" and in opposition to Bengali identity and culture.

In the second chapter, I do close readings of two texts to reveal differing discourses on Bengali Muslim identity within the Bengali speaking Muslims. The first text, *Koo Riti Barjan* is a pedagogical one, written by a rural clergy Emdad Ali, for circulation among the rural population. In contrast to the rural audience of Emdad Ali's text, *Islam Darshan*, a Bengali periodical published by the Bengali Muslim literati is markedly different in tone and evinces a very different notion of what constitutes Bengali Muslim identity. A tension that marks both texts under consideration, however, involves concerns about the spoken language of the overwhelming number of Muslims in Bengal, existing local habits, and practices, and their compatibility with a Muslim identity. As I have mentioned before, this opposition between the Bengali language and Islamic identity was itself, at least in part, spawned by the operations of the colonial census. By the 1920s, i.e. the time when *Koo Riti Barjan* and *Islam Darshan* were being written, this

oppositional structuring of the Bengali and Muslim identity resulted in a tension that had acquired the status of a 'problematique', or a presupposition that had to be addressed by all claiming to represent the Muslim community in Bengal. The tension could be resolved in different ways, as they are in the two texts under consideration, but it had to be addressed; there was no running away from it. My second chapter is also an attempt to show how two texts authored by members of very different social groups and addressed to very different audiences in very different linguistic registers are both inflected by a fundamental tension in articulating a Bengali Muslim identity. The tension here is between the territory of what had come to be considered as the domain of the Bengali language and the supposed territory of Islam.

The third and final chapter centers on a Bengali Muslim identity as envisaged by the English-educated Urdu-speaking elites of Bengal. Unlike the Bengali Muslim literati who emphasized local culture to define the community, the elites drawing on their past glory of belonging to the ruling class associated Muslim identity with honor and power. Since trajectories of power were central to Muslim identity in the eyes of the elites, they spoke the rhetoric of empowering the community through special representation in public services. The route to reclaiming equal status for the Muslims was through government service. This perspective led the Muslim elites to conceptualize Bengali Muslim identity in which primacy was accorded to modern English education. The elite articulation of Bengali Muslim identity is narrated through an analysis of select writings by Ameer Ali and the role of English newspapers published by the Muslim elites.

Scholars have written on the impact of the elites, the Bengali Muslim literati, the clergy and the census in defining the Bengali Muslim community, but there has been no

effort to gather all these differing arguments together to present a comprehensive story on the genealogy of the discourse on Bengali Muslim identity. My thesis is an effort in that direction.

## Chapter I

### Census and Identity Formation: Transforming the Nature of Bengali Muslims in Colonial Bengal

British rule instantiated wide scale transformation of Indian society. In addition to political and economic consequences, British colonialism had a deep impact on the social set up of the subcontinent. The colonial project effected structural changes in the social system through the census by compiling information into objective categories that the British used for governance. The census questionnaires sought information on literacy, education, profession, wealth, religious affiliation and caste. The reports based on the censuses categorized people by religion and compared the relative levels of literacy, education, profession, and wealth among communities. The definitions accompanied by numbers added statistical content to these categories. The colonial census was the tool with which the British engineered the social rubric of Indian society. The categories conceived by the censuses in order to define and classify the Indian people impacted their understanding of themselves. Numerical majority was given prominence in the colonial census and became the basis of caste and communal politics.[28]

The British classified people by religious belief, and in the manner of response and debate, the idea of being a Hindu or Muslim became central to community identity.

[28] Communal politics, which has been a disruptive force in India since her independence in 1947, cannot be fully conceived of without referring to the colonial apparatuses of governance. The imagined threat from another religious community led to sectarian demands for jobs, education, representations in legislative councils, and even demands for the creation of new nation states. Although my paper is not centered on communalism, the machinations of colonial census did play a role in creating a communal consciousness.

The debate generated by the urban educated section of the Bengali Muslim community led to a deepening of divisions between communities. Drawing on existing scholarship I seek to understand how the colonial censuses of Bengal were instrumental in creating new identities for the Bengali Muslims.[29] I would argue that due to categories invented by the colonial censuses for defining people, the Bengali Muslims in response to categorization developed a new narrative of themselves in which their Muslim-ness became central to their identity. This was a break from precolonial Bengali Muslim identity, where religion was not the only boundary for the purpose of self definition. The colonial project of categorizing people heightened religious awareness in contrast to other cultural commonalities between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. The Bengali Muslims increasingly started identifying with Islam only, foregoing other cultural markers as part of the Bengali Muslim identity. The opposition between Bengali and Islam, I will argue, was to a large extent a fall out of the operations of colonial census, which set the limits of the discourse of defining Bengali and Muslim identities. The tension between Bengali and Muslim as projected in the census had to be addressed, which in turn led to new definitions of what it meant to have a Bengali Muslim identity.

The apparently benign use of categories for enumerating communities led the communities to reshape their identities to fit into these categories. Edward Said argued that the colonialist project is "absolutely anatomical and enumerative: to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things Oriental into manageable parts."[30] In this chapter my effort is to situate how the 'imagined

[29] In this thesis I use the term Bengali Muslim and Muslim interchangeably to represent the Muslims of Bengal.

[30] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 72.

communities' of Hindus and Muslims in the colonial *imaginaire* became "enumerated communities." [31]

In order to establish my argument I will primarily focus on the decennial census reports of Bengal from 1872 to 1911. By analyzing select descriptions in these censuses, I will show how the position of the subjects was constituted by classifying and naturalizing categories such as *jati* (caste), educated, uneducated, Hindus and Muslims. This chapter will investigate the ways in which the classificatory logic of the colonial census was employed to create a new biography of the Bengali Muslim community. It will emphasize the process by which the subjects of census internalized these categories and constructed new identities for themselves. Further, I will delineate how the Bengali Muslim identity got reformulated through new knowledge production that these censuses undertook.[32] In other words, how is Bengali Muslim identity made through the colonial census' focusing on religion as the primary location of community? The ways in which colonial administrators emphasized religion in their census would help us know what changed during colonial rule.

**Bengali Muslim society during Muslim rule**

In order to understand what changed during the colonial period it is important to know the nature of Bengali Muslim society during precolonial times. The advent of Muslim rule in Bengal has been traced to late fifteenth century with the establishment of

[31] Carol A Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, 'Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament,' in Carol A Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, ed. *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 9.

[32] Though the censuses had an impact on both the Muslim and Hindu communities, the chapter will not focus on the effects of the census on Hindu caste consciousness.

the Husain Shah dynasty in Bengal. The Husain Shahi period of the independent Bengal Sultanate, which lasted for two hundred years, saw the emergence of Islam in Bengal. M R Tarafdar's important study of this period reveals that "the foreign rulers who had come in the wake of Muslim conquest were yet to settle down here, and the local converts who seem to have originally belonged to the lower grades of the Hindu society had hardly any sociological reasons to spring suddenly into a stable group of enlightened people." [33]

Tarafdar argues since Brahmanical orthodoxy looked down upon low-caste Hindus, the Muslim missionaries faced no difficulty in converting people to the new faith, but "Islam sat quite lightly on the heart of this region," till orthodoxy swept the region during the colonial period.[34] Islam in its simple and austere form did not appear to characterize the life of the people. The literature of the period shows some form of folk Islam among the Muslim masses, who were hardly connected with the dogmas of religion. Popular Islam was not free from accretions and deeply influenced by Hindu customs. Popular or folk Islam assimilated a variety of beliefs and practices that were present in Bengal's precolonial religious environment. Apart from the veneration of pirs (holy men and saints), Muslim converts had faith in Hindu divinities.[35] This was partly because of the efforts of Muslim Sufi saints who "appear to have brought about a cultural synthesis by adapting yogic and tantric philosophy to Islamic mysticism."[36]

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[33] M R Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal* (Dhaka: University of Dhaka: 1965; reprint, Dhaka: University of Dhaka: 1999), 14.

[34] Ibid., 19.

[35] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 280; also see Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 50-51. Tarafdar, Eaton, and Roy also mention the veneration of Manasa, (Hindu snake goddess) as a common practice among Muslim converts.

[36] Ibid., 178.

Historians have argued that, "Islam in traditional Bengal was…marked by its tendency towards convergence with and assimilation to the local cultural milieu."[37] The authors of the early Bengali Muslim literature were 'instrumental in casting Islamic tradition in a syncretic mould'. They reconstructed Islam according to the specific needs and demands of the social and cultural milieus.[38] The popular worship of Satyanarayan by the Hindus was borrowed from the Muslim tradition of Satya Pir. Popularized by Hussain Shah, the tradition idealized the 'symbol of Hindu-Muslim syncretism'.[39] Further evidence of a syncretic culture was a significant Muslim population having Hindu names. The Bengali Muslim "masses, particularly those at the poor levels of society, had a tendency to retain local names and appellations, such as Mandal, Pramanik and Sarkar-family names, occupational in their origin, to be found among the Hindus as well."[40]

The nature of Bengali Muslim identity took a new turn in late-nineteenth century colonial Bengal. Historians of colonial Bengal have argued the importance of reform movements in purging syncretic tendencies and articulating a Bengali Muslim identity

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[37] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 4.

[38] Ibid., xii, 6, 7, 249.

[39] Ibid., 215. Although it is a debatable fact, nevertheless it became a symbol of syncretism. The close mixing of two communities resulted in a common god being called into existence. A text devoted to the cult composed by poet Sankaracharya in 1644 identifies Satya Pir as the son of one of Sultan Ala-Din Hussian Shah's daughters, and hence a Muslim. While another version considers Satya Pir as born of Hindu goddess Chandbibi, and was sent to the world to restore justice and harmony. Moreover, in the delta region of Bengal, largely inhabited by Muslims, the cult of Bonbibi played a significant role in their social lives. The legend of Bonbibi, the protector of humans, from tiger-god Dakhin Ray also spoke of a shared tradition. See Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company: 2005). Ghosh's novel set in the Sunberbans in deltaic Bengal, gives an excellent account of the legend of Bonbibi; Richard Eaton in *The Rise of Islam* also notes how the legend of Bonbibi associated with the tiger-deity, a soldier and superhuman agent became identified with Islam.

[40] Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), 6.

exclusively centered on religion.[41] What gets overlooked is the impact of the census, which, I argue, provided the reformists means for mobilization. The argument here is that the initial thrust to define a Bengali Muslim identity came from the ways the census used categories to define the people. In the following sections I argue how the census became the site where identity was shaped through religion only. The working of the census, the description it provides of the communities, and the debates it generated led to the formation of a distinct Bengali Muslim identity, hinged on religion only, that overlooked Bengali language and the culture associated with it.[42]

Census historiography addresses British obsession with classifying the Indian population. Bernard Cohn's seminal essay "The Census and Objectification in South Asia" shows how the colonial census was not a passive instrument of data gathering but an active process that created new identity for Indians. According to Cohn "the census was one of the situations in which Indians were confronted with the question of who they are and what their social and cultural systems were."[43] Unlike the census in Britain, which was a "secular institution in the collection and presentation of data," census taking in colonial India had a different purpose altogether.[44] In India the question on religion, caste and race was introduced since the census began in 1872, and religion was used as a fundamental category in census tabulation. The point is illustrated in the 1872 census: "In the forms provided by the Government of India for exhibiting the results of the census,

[41] Rafiuddin Ahmed considers the reform movements as a catalyst that "helped bring the Muslim masses in line with ashraf aspiration." Ibid., 38.

[42] In the next chapter I discuss how Bengali language was claimed as part of Islamic culture and heritage.

[43] Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 248.

[44] R B Bhagat, 'Census and the Construction of Communalism in India,' *Economic & Political Weekly* vol 36, No. 46/47 (Nov. 24-30, 2001), 43520.

the population is supposed to be divided into five religious classes, namely, Hindus, Muhammadans, Christians, Buddhists, and Others." [45]

Prior to the census, the British had started revenue surveys. Accurate information on village lands was gathered, which later formed the geographical unit to conduct the census.[46] The village became the 'dominant site of social life' were caste relations was one of the determinants of social position. A society based on caste was different from Western society "for caste was opposed to the basic premises of individualism" and it even "actively resisted the modern state."[47] Following James Stuart Mill's *History* the British were engaged in identifying features of India that would be objects for "rational policies of social reform."[48] Under the British caste and religion became categories that would be "capable of systematizing India's diverse forms of social identity, community and organization."[49] Since the Indians loosely defined religion, the British sought to impose a formal definition in order to 'systematize' the population. The new definition of religion reinforced the British understanding of communities in terms of their religious identity. The colonial administrators did not understand the social structure, but they formulated new definitions that stimulated the process of altering the identities of Hindus and Muslims.[50]

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[45] H Beverly, *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872), 129.

[46] Cohn, *An Anthropologist*, 235-239.

[47] Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Minds: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 13.

[48] Ludden, 'Orientalist Empiricism', 264. James Stuart Mill's *History of British India*, published in 1820, argued for the necessity of British rule in India. He presented India as 'irrational' society, which was in need of reform. India in his study became the object of reform.

[49] Dirks, *Castes of Minds*, 5.

[50] Cohn, *An Anthropologist*, 230-236.

**Essentializing community identity through religion**

This section will analyze different categories to see how the Bengali Muslim identity was constructed with religion as the locus of the community. I will show how a new definition of Muslims emerged in response to census enumeration, and how the debates and responses these descriptions generated altered the people's understanding of community identity.

It has been argued by Cohn that "through the asking of questions and compiling of information in categories which the British rulers could utilize for governance, the census provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves."[51] The presence of a large Muslim population in colonial Bengal as reported in the first census of Bengal in 1872 came as a surprise to the colonial administrators. The census report of 1872 emphasized lower-caste conversion as the primary cause for this large presence. But the administrators were not certain whether they could be called 'Muslims' because their practices did not adhere to orthodox Islam. Beverley, the Census Commissioner of Bengal "doubt[ed] much whether such conversions have been advantageous to the proselytes. They call indeed upon Allah and the Prophet; but still I doubt much if they have been weaned from any of their superstitions. The higher ranks of Moslems here in general abstain from making offerings to the pagan gods, but the multitude in all distresses have recourse to the idols, and even make offerings at many holy days."[52]

According to Beverly, "not the least interesting of the facts bought out by the late census is the large number of Muhammadans found in Bengal. The total number of Muhammadans in these provinces exceeds twenty and a half million (20,664,775). The

[51] Cohn, *An Anthropologist*, 230.

[52] *Census of Bengal, 1872* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872), 135.

vast majority of them, namely seventeen and a half million are found in Lower Bengal."[53] The preponderance of the Muslim population in Bengal was a new discovery for the colonialists, which the census report attributes to conversion:

> But that conversion was very largely carried on in Bengal, appears, not only probable, but is the only explanation of the large numbers of Muhammadans found here in the present day who occupy the same social position as their Hindu … "[T]he existence of Muhammadans in Bengal is not due so much to the introduction of Mughal blood into the country as to the conversion of the former inhabitants for whom a rigid system of caste discipline rendered Hinduism intolerable.[54]

The question of conversion has been a subject of debate in historiography, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.[55] My point here is the issue of a large presence of Muslim population in Bengal, as pointed out in the 1872 census, generated a particular kind of response from the Bengali Muslim community, which was instrumental in forging an Islamized identity among the masses, that was projected as the other of Bengali culture and language.

The 1901 Census of Bengal describes the storm of protest from the educated Muslims refuting the local origin theory of Muslims. E A Gait in his report of the 1901 census writes, "a Muhammadan gentleman has recently published a book in which he attempts to controvert the statement made by Mr. Beverley in the Census Report for 1872."[56] The reference here is Khondkar Fuzli Rubee's *The Origin of the Muhammadans of Bengal* published in 1895.[57] Rubee refuted Beverly's thesis and argued that the

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[53] *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872,* 130.

[54] *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872,* 132.

[55] For an analyses of different theories of conversion see, Richard Eaton's *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760.*

[56] E A Gait, *Bengal Census Report, 190I*, 165.

Muslims descended from religious teachers, officers and soldiers who came there from the Muslim world during five and a half centuries of Muslim rule in Bengal. Another cause was the influx of political refugees from northern India. The 1901 census also mentions one "Abu A Ghaznavi, a leading gentleman of Mymensigh, who has prepared an excellent account of the Muhammadans of that district, and who is a strong supporter of the theory of foreign origin." Ghaznavi argues that "roughly speaking 20 percent of the present Muhammadans are lineal descendents of foreign settlers, 50 percent of them have an admixture of foreign blood and the remaining 30 percent are probably descended from Hindu and other converts."[58]

These responses to the theory of Beverley resulted in a new trend among the masses to belong to any one of the four respectable social groups - Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, and Pathan. This preoccupation is gauged from the census report of 1901:

> Amongst the earlier converts, and especially in the functional groups, Hindu names and titles are still very common. Names such as Kali Shekh, Kalachand Shekh, Braja Shekh or Gopal Mandal are constantly met with. When a Mullah effects a conversion at the present day, he usually gives the neophyte a new name, but it is often chosen in such a way as to give some indication of the old one; Rajani for example becomes Riaz-uddin. This reminds one of the way in which a Muhammadan of low social position gradually assumes a more high sounding designation as he rises in life.[59]

In 1872, the number of claimants to these respectable social orders for Bengal was 266, 378-of this 232, 189 were returned as Sheikhs, 9, 858 as Syeds, and 2, 205 as Pathans-out of a total Muslim population of 17, 609, 135.[60] By 1901 the numbers claiming Sheikhs

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[57] E A Gait, *Bengal Census Report, 190I*, 165.

[58] Ibid., 166.

[59] Ibid., 172.

[60] *Census of Bengal 1872*, Table ib &vb, xxxii, xccv.

had increased to 19, 527, 221, in a total Muslim population of over twenty-one and a half million.[61]

The new nomenclature of Bengali Muslims reflected the social aspiration of the lower classes and became an important indicator of social change. The rural Muslims believed that it signified a distinct identity, which was Muslim and not Bengali. It was also seen as a step towards *ashraf*ization and hence having an Islamic identity.[62] This was further helped by the census operations, which allowed the Muslims to register their claims officially. Most Muslims did not return under the 'Caste' head in the census questionnaires. Functional groups analogous to Hindu caste groups existed among the Muslims. The largest among the Muslims were the Jolahas.[63] The Jolahas strongly objected to being returned under their functional designations and made claims to be returned as Sheikhs.[64] The colonial government had turned down their request initially. By 1911, the government allowed them to return as Sheikhs in Eastern Bengal.[65] O' Malley in the census report of 1911 mentions that the government issued orders, "in the case of Jolahas, Kulus, etc., if a person returns himself as such, the name of the caste should be entered. If, however, he does not do so return himself, even though the

[61] *Census of India 1901*, via: ii Table xiii-Caste Tables, 288.

[62] The *ashraf* Muslims claimed foreign descent as a marker of their identity and were culturally and linguistically very different from their Bengali speaking co-religionists. Their habits and customs were inspired from the precolonial Mughal court culture.

[63] Jolahas were a community of weavers, who had a very low status among Muslims. Caste groups were generally defined in relation to their hereditary occupation. These caste groups were strictly endogamous. Like the Hindu caste groups, the practice of endogamy was prevalent among the Jolahas

[64] *Census of Bengal* 1901, 442.

[65] Eastern Bengal had the largest concentration of Bengali Muslims.

enumerator considers him to be Jolaha, Kulu, etc., the entry should be Sheikh, Pathan, etc., as in the case of other Muhammadans."[66]

Kenneth Jones has argued that the census was a catalyst for change as it both described and altered the environment. He notes, "describing meant providing order to that which is described, and at the same time stimulating forces which would alter that order."[67] Jones' formulation that 'categories necessitate definition and definitions impose order' is useful in understanding how religion became the central marker for Bengali Muslims. I delineate the process through a specific example from the 1872 census return.

A sample return of the 1872 census in village Tribeni in Hoogly district showed all Hindus returning as Bengalis under the heading 'Race or Tribe' and the Muslims returning as Syeds, Sheikhs and Pathans.[68] Since these appellations fit the bill of a normative Islam, the masses showed a tendency to be identified with such names. In a way the census contributed toward the development of a normative Muslim identity, reflected in the trend among Muslim masses in villages to adopt titles associated with *ashrafs* to define their Muslim-ness in contradistinction to Bengali-ness.

Some scholars have characterized this distinction that 'Hindus were Bengalis and Muslims were only Muslims,' as a response to the effects of cheaply printed vernacular reformist literature whose thrust was toward the Islamization of society.[69] They argue, "the multifaceted efforts at Islamization at first confused the masses. More and more,

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[66] L O'Malley*, Census of Bengal* 1911, 446.

[67] Jones. 'Religious Identity and the Indian Census,' 74. Jones shows the working of the census as a force of change by examining the relation of the census to Hindu consciousness, with particular emphasis on Punjab and North India.

[68] *Census of Bengal, 1872,* Appendix A, v.

[69] The ruler clergy played a significant role in the production and distribution of such literature. I elaborate on this theme in the chapter two.

they were made to feel that as Muslims they were different from their Hindu neighbors…[T]he constant harping on extraterritorial links created in their minds a vague, yet persistent, notion that perhaps most, if not all, Muslims were aliens in Bengal." [70] Not undermining the role played by such literature, I argue here that the category of religion in the questionnaire prepared the initial ground for the ways in which the Bengali Muslim community defined themselves.

As mentioned earlier, for the British caste and religion were central to the understanding of Indian society. Religion and caste played a central role in colonial imagination because it provided fertile grounds for production of colonial knowledge based on objective science. The privileging of religion in the census questionnaires consciously underplayed other social differences and similarities that existed between the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal. Most importantly was the fact that the non-*ashrafs* were organized into separate endogamous societies that 'paralleled the organization of Hindu society.'[71] Apart from this the majority of Bengali Muslims belonged to the Sunni sect, with a minor population of Shias mostly found in cities and erstwhile seats of Muslim power.[72] In the sample return of Tribeni, it is interesting to note that both language and sect were not used as enumerative categories. It is my consideration that the use of these as enumerative categories would not have reinforced religion as the site of identity for the Bengali Muslim community. Since both the Hindus and the Muslim masses spoke

[70] Rafiuddin Ahmed. *The Bengal Muslims,*111.

[71] Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, pp. 101-137.

[72] W W Hunter, *Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (Lahore: Premier Book House, Reprinted from the 1871 edition, 1974).

Bengali, it would have been difficult for the British to project the communities as different from each other.

The 1872 census of Bengal had originally intended to collect data on the basis of sects, but Beverly mentioned, "the column was on further consideration omitted" because "the scanty particulars that have been recorded on this head in some of the returns are only calculated to mislead."[73] He gives the example of only 92 persons returning themselves as Brahmos (a monotheist Hindu sect which opposed ritual practices), though the number was thought to be far more by him. The same paragraph also mentions Sunnis and Shias but does not provide information on their numbers. The colonial administrators presumed it to be 'misleading' for it did not have the potential to create the essentializing of difference between Hindus and Muslims, which was a central concern of Orientalist discourse.[74]

**Summary**

In the context of colonialism, census was an attempt to get "precise information regarding the numbers of people," because without it the British "felt a serious inconvenience in the administration of Bengal."[75] From the very beginning, the colonial rulers knew that to rule India, first they had to understand Indian society. Thus began an obsessive frenzy to collect data, quantify, and enumerate. If a population had to be

[73] *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872,* 136.

[74] Peter van der Veer. 'The Foreign Hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism', in Breckenridge and van der Veer, ed. *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, 23. The British understood the Hindus and Muslims as mutually exclusive communities and worked towards reinforcing the difference through various administrative policies. Although I do not deal with the question of religious communities defining themselves as belonging to a 'nation', it is important to note that by the 1930s this idea became the central plank of Muslim nationalism.

[75] *Census of Bengal 1872*, 1.

controlled, it was thought imperative that its composition be known. How many were Muslims? How many Hindus? : The state demanded answers to such questions. The census in collecting such answers inadvertently created identities anew since any answer to how many were Muslims would not be possible without implicit discursive rationales on what constituted Muslim-ness or Islam, or for that matter, Hinduism. The census reports not merely counted, but also laid out implicit (or even explicit) discursive justifications on who would count and in which category. The ramifications of Beverley's theory of conversion in Bengal furnishes a telling example of the ways in which presuppositions about Muslim-ness were being created in determining who is a Muslim. As I have noted before, according to him most Muslims in Bengal converted to Islam to break free from the rigidity of caste-structured Hindu society and presumable in order to gain social mobility.

This positing of Islam as the religion of social equality may have been completely at odds with the lived reality of Muslims in Bengal, and indeed other parts of South Asia, where caste-like structures were extant in Muslim societies. In thus presupposing the absence of caste among Muslims, Beverley's thesis implicitly suggested that those among Muslims who paid heed to caste markers as a basis of self-identification were not Muslim enough since they did not match up to the normative ideal of Islam. This presupposition perhaps explains why most Muslims did not return in the 'Caste' head of the census questionnaire and the *julahas,* loath to be recorded in the census as a caste, insisted that they be recorded under the appellation 'Sheikh'. Thus, the boundaries of Muslim-ness were inadvertently being created in opposition to the category "caste" which in its turn was exclusively reserved for understanding the Hindu social of the "Homo Hierarchicus".

I have mentioned before, the ramifications of such census assumptions among the Muslims of Bengal in the tendency to take up Perso-Arabic sounding names to replace supposedly more local, Bengali, un-Islamic ones. It was through processes such as these that the oppositional structuring of Muslim and Bengali identities came into being. For example, a Muslim from Beverley's census with a name such as Gopal Mandal who had hitherto been unselfconscious of any contradiction between his name and his being a Muslim would suddenly wake up to the "realization" that his name was too Bengali for him to be considered truly a Muslim. To carry a caste name or a local name was to concede to being a "convert", or in Beverley's word "a neophyte" and thus acknowledge that one was only nominally Muslim and not substantively so. It is startling to see how the census, far from being a simple tabulation of numbers, in fact worked as a complex method of knowledge formation which deeply influenced the colonized in their assessment of what was "authentic" in their religion and how to be authentically religious.

The pressures of census operations contributed to the creation of a new 'enumerative' community. The new 'community' increasingly defined itself in terms of a rationalist discourse --- in the language of numerical strength, well-defined boundaries, exclusive rights and the motivation to act in order to protect these rights. In the crucible of colonialism the awareness of being a Hindu or Bengali Muslim became sharper than before. The colonial census put the Bengali Muslim community in a double-bind. On one hand they focused on the task of defining their Muslim-ness as a response to census, and on the other this definition increasingly distanced them from the Bengali language and culture. This became fertile ground for Bengali Hindu communalists to project the

Bengali Muslims as aliens of Bengal who sought legitimacy for their identity through extraterritorial markers. The Bengali Muslims now faced a new threat of defending their rootedness to Bengal. The task was left to the emerging Bengali Muslim literati who sought to claim Bengali language and culture as part of Islamic heritage. I turn to this question in the next chapter.

## Chapter II

### Rethinking Bengali Muslim Identity: A Reading of two Muslim Texts from Early Twentieth Century Bengal

This chapter will do a close reading of *Koo Riti Barjan*, a cheaply printed vernacular text in 1922, and contrast it with writings from *Islam Darshan*, a contemporary Muslim periodical in Bengali. While a single organization patronized both these texts, they differ widely in their content and analysis of what constitutes a Bengali Muslim identity. The objective of the chapter is not only to show the differing conceptions of Bengali Muslim identity formation that emerge from an analysis of these texts, but also to highlight how both the materials are attentive to the issue of Bengali language as an integral part of being a Muslim. Existing scholarship on Bengali Muslim identity formation has vacillated between Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness, and has considered these twin markers of Bengali Muslim identity fundamentally opposed to one rather. In the framework of such scholarship the label of 'Bengali' sits rather uneasily on a Bengali speaking Muslim, and the Bengali Muslim is either considered more of a Muslim than a Bengali or vice-a versa. This dominant framework of existing scholarship is brought to question through an analysis of the subject matter pertaining to Bengali Muslim identity in *Koo Riti Barjan* and *Islam Darshan*.

Most scholars have perceived Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness as fundamentally opposed to each other and through their studies have shown how the Bengali speaking Muslim acquires a distinct Muslim identity. Rafiuddin Ahmed's pioneering work on Bengali Muslim identity suggest pervasive "local accretions" in Bengali speaking

Muslim society and the "fundamentalist[s'] rejection of local accretions created tensions in the society.'[76] Ahmed's study of Bengali Muslim identity follows a framework where an "ethnic identity based on Islam induced… a contemptuous rejection of everything associated with the un-Islamic land of Bengal-its language and culture" and "at the same time the idea of an Islamic identity … began to gain ground which would wipe out the stigma of their [the Bengali speaking Muslims] local and atrap descent.'[77]

According to Ahmed the cheaply printed vernacular literature circulating in rural Bengal since late-nineteenth century served as "a vehicle to educate the Muslim masses on the basic principles of faith."[78] It had stories relating to Islamic cultural heritage, manuals for religious instruction, laid emphasis on correct Islamic values in accordance with the Koran and Hadith and was characterized by a sharp rejection of the cult of *pirs* (Muslim mystics). The texts were attentive to non-Muslim cultural practices and urged the Muslims to distance themselves from it. Primarily written in verse form and prose style, these texts made a distinction between Muslims and Hindus, stressed on the difference between 'Muslim culture and local culture and reminded the people of their separate identity as Muslims.[79]

In a similar vein, P K Datta, focusing on a different set of cheaply printed vernacular literature in the early twentieth century argues that these tracts were reoriented

[76] Rafiuddin Ahmed, 'Conflicts and Contradictions in Bengali Islam: Problems of Change and Adjustment,' in Katherine P. Ewing (ed.) *Shari'at and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988), 127.

[77] Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 184. The term atrap was used to define Muslims who did not claim foreign descent.

[78] Rafiuddin Ahmed, 'Conflicts and Contradictions in Bengali Islam,' 117.

[79] Ibid., 117.

towards a communal formation of society.[80] The recurrent themes in the texts combined an ethic of hard work, thrift and 'individual profit', with an insistence on 'collective betterment' through strengthening the solidarity of the Islamic 'community'. Datta argues that these texts successfully achieved a reformulation of popular Islam by linking the practical with the ethical. For instance, the improvement ethic ensured that each act of economic progress could be interpreted through the moral grid to a corresponding contribution to the Islamic community. To be a 'good Muslim' was to be austere in festivities (promoting thrift); restrain from indiscriminate borrowing from moneylenders; avoid getting entangled in litigation and acquire basic education.[81]

These texts urged the Muslims to avoid extravagance. They could do so by overcoming their desires, which is embodied by the excess in Hindu festivities. (It has been remarked that Muslim festivals in general were sparse affairs.)[82] The location of Hindu other becomes significant here. The Hindu is embodied in the figure of the moneylender who entraps Muslims in debts. The Hindu becomes both the origin and beneficiary of Muslim misery. Since the looming presence of the Hindu is closely related to a Muslim's moral downfall, the Hindu is never projected as the antagonistic other. Rather the "Hindu is seen as a contaminating presence in the self," associated with all kinds of un-Islamic desires, which the Muslim needs to overcome to lead a moral life.[83] If a moral act results in piety for the Muslims, the failure to reform one's desire prevents the achievement of this ideal. Datta argues, "by internally locating the Hindu, these texts

[80] P K Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). See Chapter 2.

[81] Ibid., 67-72.

[82] Ibid., 77.

[83] Ibid., 76.

insert their recommendations within the Wahabi and Faraizi traditions of purifications."[84] Through a complex textual analysis Datta reveals how these texts render a communal reading of society.

This chapter will approach *Koo Riti Barjan* and *Islam Darshan* not as vehicles of 'communal formulation' or 'rejection of un-Islamic practices' and instead argue that vernacular literature was a source of constant debate and contestation on how the Islamic identity was to be defined in relation to Bengali language. A close reading of our material will reveal that the Muslim identity was not in opposition to Bengali language and culture, rather the Bengali language was situated within the history of Islam. The writers of these texts were instrumental in claiming the Bengali language as part of Islamic heritage and culture.

### ***Koo Riti Barjan*: Articulating identity for the masses**

Emdad Ali wrote *Koo Riti Barjan* in 1922 under the advice of Hajji Nasiruddin Ahmed. A foreword by Hajji Nasiruddin confirms this fact. The patron was a disciple of Abu Bakr, a pir of Assam and Bengal who chaired province-level organizations like Anjumane Waizine Bangla and Anjumane Ulemaye Bangla, and local associations like Anjumane Islamia (Faridpur) and Anjumane Tablige Islam (Rangpur). The publications brought out by these organizations numbered over 2000.[85] *Koo Riti Barjan* happens to be one such text that was published under the patronage of one of Abu Bakr's disciples.

The book begins by informing the readers on the correct tenets of greeting in accordance with the Koran and Hadith. The student enquires why *adaab,* a common form

[84] P K Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 76.

[85] Ibid., 88.

of salutation, is un-Islamic. The teacher suggests that the greeting was invented for non-Muslims in the court of Akbar, hence Muslims should only use *asalaam alaykum* (peace be upon you) which is in conformity with the Hadith.[86] He also cautions the students not to use salutations like 'good morning' and 'salute' for it has its origins in Christianity.[87] The discourse on greetings points to the construction of Muslim identity on exclusivist lines which should not be infused with any Christian elements. The absence of the Hindu other is noticeable in the examples used by the teacher.

The section on *Tash Khela Haram* (The Evils of Playing Cards) alerts the Muslims on the ills of card games, characterizes a Muslim community centered on hard work and diligence, directs anti-Christian sentiments towards anti-British feelings and quests for Hindu-Muslim unity. Card games are considered sinful for it is a waste of time, it deals with images and insults the Muslims.[88] The teacher mentions that *Sahib* (King), *Bibi* (Queen), *Gulam* (Jack) are signifiers of Muslim symbols and since Islam forbids idolatry, the game is a sin.[89] A card game according to the teacher is Satan's invention to prevent a Hindu-Muslim identity.[90] The articulation of communal integrity through a rejection of certain social practices is a new development in these printed texts. Satan, one can argue, refers to the British. In the voice of the teacher we are told that no true

[86] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan* (Bhandariya, P.O. Bhandariya, Barisal, 1922), 1-3.

[87] Ibid., 4.

[88] Ibid., 9.

[89] Ibid., 11.

[90] Ibid., 12.

Muslim or Hindu plays the game.[91] Thus the connection between the British and the corrupting practices of card playing is obvious.

The context of Hindu-Muslim unity here can only be understood in reference to events unfolding in Bengal in the decades preceding the 1920s. Bengal was partitioned in 1905, under the viceroyalty of Lord Curzon. The official reason for the division was to provide a remedy for the under-administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam, which had a majority Muslim population. Partition in effect gave political shape to the Muslim community in Bengal.[92] After partition East Bengal witnessed improvement in the field of communication infrastructures and education. The biggest impact though was in the field of education. The British government provided financial aid to educational institutions. These resulted in the rise of more *madrasas* (religious school). In order to popularize education among the Muslims the British resorted to an experiment where Urdu was made an optional subject in ordinary primary schools. Grants were provided to primary schools, which had a maulvi to teach the language. The aim was to attract Muslims, who did not wish to learn English, to acquire a language, which was "the easiest gate to much of their religious literature."[93] In addition to this the secondary schools provided for the learning of English along with other subjects taught in Arabic. While the purpose of the experiment was to provide a combination of religious and secular instructions, in effect it tended to accentuate the difference between two forms of

[91] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 12.

[92] Rajat Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal 1875-1927* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 186.

[93] 'Quinquennial Review of Education in Eastern Bengal and Assam 1907-1908 to 1911-1912,' vol. I, p 57 quoted in Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal*, 290.

education rather than minimizing it.[94] When partition was annulled in 1910, the Muslims were sorely disappointed. It slowly dawned upon them that the locus of power was to shift back to Calcutta, where their leadership was not very strong. Some educated Muslims sensing this frustration, started talking of a Hindu-Muslim united front against the British.[95] Some of these educated Muslims voiced their opinion saying, "our quarrel is not with the Hindus, but the British."[96] The political climate in which *Koo Riti Barjan* is written makes clear its anti-British stance.

The emergence of anti- British sentiment is further evident when the teacher continues to write that no "true Hindu or Muslim partakes of this game (of card playing)", rather people who are "trained in *bejatio* education" (Western-educated) uphold such sport.[97] Interestingly, as has been mentioned by Partha Chatterjee's discussion of the word "jatiya", the semantic load of "jatiya" occupied a fluid terrain and could mean "national" or "ethnic" or "religious" or "linguistic" identities, and can be deciphered only from the semantic grammar of a particular text or context.[98] It is in this context I am reading anti-British sentiments in the text *Koo Riti Barjan*.

Moreover, the contempt towards western education is a further sign that preachers in Bengal wanted the community to acquire a religious education only. This is gathered from the prescription of alternatives for card games. The teacher suggests, "both Hindus

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[94] Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal*, 291-293.

[95] Rajat Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*, 219.

[96] Fazlul Huq declared this in the newspaper *Bengalee*, April 26, 1913. See Rajat Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*, 220.

[97] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 13.

[98] Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 110-114.

and Muslims should refrain from playing cards. Instead, energies should be channelized into thinking about religion, reading books, or cutting thread. This will lead to worldly and other worldly fulfillment."[99] The emphasis given to reading books here imply education pertaining to religion for we have already seen the condemning of "bejatio education." In addition to this a new theme emerges –emphasis on work. Cutting thread is a signifier of economic activity. The early decades of the twentieth century saw a marked extension in the cultivation of jute, and the industry witnessed a price boom since the 1910s.[100] The peasants were urged to take advantage of it by concentrating on work and not idle their time in playing cards. *Koo Riti Barjan* is suggestive of a Bengali Muslim identity hinged on religious learning and ethics of work, which will lead to the economic betterment of the community.

I will now reveal how the instantiation of Muslim-ness underlines the Bengali language as an integral part of the Bengali Muslim's cultural and religious identity**.** In the section on the correct tenets of using prefixes before a name, the teacher mentions one should not use *Sri* because it generally refers to Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth.[101] Since it is an honorific prefixed to Hindu names and gods, "Muslims who use it are committing a sin against Islam."[102] Muslims using such honorifics are unaware of its true meaning because they have received their primary education from Hindu instructors.[103]

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[99] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 13.

[100] Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal*, 120-121.

[101] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 6.

[102] Ibid., 7.

[103] Ibid., 8.

One may not be mistaken in seeing the 'Hindu as a contaminating presence in the self', but in a carefully constructed exchange between the student and the teacher, he absolves the Hindu of corrupting the Muslim.[104] The Hindu teacher according to him is not aware of the consequences of Muslims using Sri and hence he should not be at fault. He ruefully suggests that "how will the Hindu know, when most Muslims are not aware of it."[105] For even he was not aware of it until he came in contact with the Hajji Nasiruddin. He goes on to preach through such practices "the Muslim community is harming itself and should be prepared for the future."[106] Such an argument gives force to the creation of schools that would impart Islamic education and make them true Muslims. The author through the discourse on 'prefixes before names' justifies the reluctance of Muslim families to send their children to schools where the "text-books were Sanskritized and the contents certainly Hinduized".[107] The bedrock of religious identity suggested by *Koo Riti Barjan* seems to depend on madrasa education.

Imbricated in upholding madrasa education is the use of language, which became central to the debate on defining the Bengali Muslim identity**.** A discussion on the permissibility of certain Bengali words to define Muslim belief systems was the focus of many Bengali Muslim writers. The teacher also asks students not to use *ishwar* for Allah, *swarga* for *behesth* (heaven), *upvas* for *roza* (fasting), *tirtha* for *haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), and *bhikshadan* for *zakat* (giving alms to the poor). According to him the Bengali equivalence of these Arabic words fail to capture the essence of Bengali Muslim

[104] Ibid., 8.

[105] Ibid., 8.

[106] Ibid., 9.

[107] Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal*, 60.

community. Ishwar is not a good substitute for Allah because Allah is one and peerless, whereas ishwar has a feminine form in *ishwari*. Moreover ishwar has many *avtaars* (incarnations), the same cannot be said for Allah. Similarly haj refers to a specific journey made to Mecca accomplishing a task in accordance with the Shariat. Bejatio's (according to the context here signifies the 'Hindu) go to Gaya or Kashi (Hindu pilgrimage centers) but that would not be considered haj for it has a specific meaning.[108] Quoting his preacher Nasiruddin, the teacher rationalizes the use of Arabic words: "Those words which have more than one meaning and are not in accordance with Shariat are considered *shirk* (associationism) and *bedat* (unholy innovation)."[109] These Bengali words are attacked on theological grounds for violating the oneness of Allah and the Muslim community.[110] Bengali as a language is not criticized, only specific Bengali words which fail to convey Islamic ideals are unacceptable to the Bengali Muslim community.

At the same time claiming difference through the use of Arabic words, which are considered as self-representation of a Muslim identity, is not in contradistinction to Bengali. The student asks: "Arabic, Persian and Urdu are Islamic languages. Does that mean we will stop using Bengali language?"[111]

Teacher: Who says Bengali is foreign and un-Islamic? Since we have been born in this country (Bengal), Bengali is our language too. But people belonging to other

[108] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 16.

[109] Ibid., 15.

[110] Here I agree with Datta who suggests that the Hindu influence was attacked on theological grounds for violating the transcendental oneness of Allah and his message. See P K Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 76.

[111] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 21.

communities also use the language. So when we find words that are opposed to our religion, where words with such potential appear, we should shun them."[112]
The conflict was not with Bengali language being opposed to Islam, rather it was a struggle over appropriate terminology to convey religious ideas. The teacher seeks to project a Bengali Muslim community that claimed Bengali as their own, by virtue of being born in Bengal and at the same time giving equal importance to Arabic and Persian as languages necessary for religious instructions and knowing Islamic culture.

One may ask, how is Bengali-ness and being Muslim reconciled through language? In *Koo Riti Barjan* another discussion between the teacher and the student provides light on the issue of language as a central component in defining the identity of a community. The student asks, "according to some maulvis, using Perso-Arabic words pollute the purity of Bangla [Bengali]. Is it true?"[113] The teacher points to a whole gamut of words used in everyday life that are secular in nature and Perso-Arabic in origin, for e.g., *admi* (person), *murabha* (candied fruit), *kabab* (skewered meat), *hakim* (doctor), *adalat* (court), *hokum* (order), *bichana* (bed) and *lep* (quilt)- and adds that if these words do not corrupt the language, it is wrong to think that the use of Allah, roja, namaz in place of ishwar, upvas, and *prarthana* (prayer) will pollute the Bengali language.[114]

If Bengali language is considered a cultural component of being a Hindu, the Muslim also claims it by showing that it is inflected with words that have Arabic origins. Through this discourse on language, the 'Bengali' language is retained as an integral part of the Bengali Muslim identity. This is in marked contrast to some of the debates that

[112] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 21.

[113] Ibid., 21.

[114] Ibid., 22.

questioned the Muslim-ness of people who used Bengali as their mother tongue.[115] For these critics use of only Arabic, Urdu or Persian can qualify towards a true Muslim identity. The Bengali Muslim does not reject Arabic or Persian in our text too on the grounds that "most Islamic injunctions in the Shariat are written in Persian, failure to learn the language will lead us in trouble… and one should also pay attention to learn Arabic with utmost care."[116]

*Koo Riti Barjan* reflects a tenuous relationship between Bengali and the Islamic languages.[117] The problem facing the Muslim clergy was they could not but be aware of belonging to two worlds-that of Islam and Bengali.[118] Though the clergy considered Bengali to be their mother tongue, they feared that knowledge of only Bengali would result in the loss of their religious identity symbolized through the learning of Islamic languages. They supported Bengali as their language through the curious logic that the language incorporated many Arabic and Persian words and hence had an Islamic tinge to it. Their inability to consider Bengali as part of Muslim cultural heritage still privileged a religious identity over a cultural identity. In an effort to bridge the religious and cultural gap a new class of Bengali Muslim writers sought to construct an Islamic tradition in the vernacular. The following section will address the issue of how a Muslim literary heritage in the Bengali language helped to placate the unfounded fears of the Muslim clergy.

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[115] Mustapha Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion as reflected in the Bengali Press 1901-1930* (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1973). For a discussion on the language debate see pp 236-246.

[116] Emdad Ali, *Koo Riti Barjan*, 27.

[117] The Muslim community considered Arabic, Persian and Urdu to be Islamic languages. Most considered it necessary to know one of these in order to maintain an Islamic identity.

[118] Gyanendra Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 228.

***Islam Darshan*: Bridging Bengali culture and Islamic Ideology**

In this section I will analyze select writings from *Islam Darshan*, a Muslim periodical written in Bengali published in 1920. Through these writings I will reveal how these writers created a Muslim genealogy for Bengali language and literature. Languages claim their distinction through the production of literature, which is also a crucial component of any language-based identity.[119] The process through which the writers of *Islam Darshan* created a distinct Muslim literature in Bengali and claimed a Bengali culture for the Muslims will be the focus of this section. In doing so I will also delineate how *Islam Darshan* differed from *Koo Riti Barjan* in laying out the characteristics of the Bengali Muslim community. While both texts are concerned with religion and the Bengali language, the process of articulating these varied widely. The discursive and argumentative style of *Islam Darshan* directed towards the well-educated Muslim audience of the cities and towns is in sharp contrast to *Koo Riti Barjan*'s pedagogical form whose primary readership was the semi-literate rural folks. The difference in form brings to fore the need to adopt different discourses for different audiences in order to articulate Bengali Muslim consciousness marked by a sense of solidarity.

*Islam Darshan* was the mouthpiece of Anjumane Waizine Bangla, whose chairperson was Abu Bakr. It was published under the editorship of Abdul Hakim and Nur Ahmed.[120] Since Anjumane Waizine Bangla patronized both the texts, it will be interesting to note how they deployed the issue of religion and Bengali language for different audiences.

[119] P K Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 84.

[120] Mustapha Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion*, 293.

The editorial claims the publication of *Islam Darshan* is a "reaction to those periodicals which unceremoniously insult the universal good of Islam."[121] The way "Hindu literature has presented the Muslims has created a wide chasm between the communities."[122] To overcome this situation *Islam Darshan* "will strive towards neutral and detailed discussion to represent the Muslims and prevent a great disaster."[123] It will serve the purpose of "neutralizing communal discomfiture" and "reclaim Muslim representation which for long was projected through Hindu writings creating a negative image of the community."[124] In order to reclaim this representation *Islam Darshan* gave a call to "create a literature and literary tradition that is Muslim and Bengali at the same time."[125]

The question that surfaces to mind is why was there a need to create a Muslim literary tradition in Bengali? Scholars have pointed to the emergence of patriotism through literature in regional languages.[126] The literary renaissance in late nineteenth century Bengal underlined a patriotic flavor as evidenced from the production of a large number of songs, poems and novels bemoaning the plight of the country. The works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhya heavily influenced this genre of literature. His *Bande Mataram* hymn in the novel *Anandamath* inspired a generation of young minds fighting colonial domination. While it fostered a sense of national belonging, it also excluded the

[121] Editorial, *Islam Darshan*, 1st year Boishakh (April-May), 1920, 3.

[122] Ibid., 4.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid., 5.

[126] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 185-1947* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 82.

Muslims from this imagining. The Muslims were repeatedly abused in the historical novels of Bankimchandra Chattopadhya.[127] They were projected as aliens, whose contribution to Bengali society went largely ignored. The plight of the Muslim was further compounded by certain sections of Muslim elite in Bengal who showed a marked prejudice towards the Bengali language.[128] The Muslims were doubly excluded both from imaging the nation and the language. In order to remedy the situation the Bengali speaking Muslim literati sought to recreate a Muslim literature in Bengali to lay claims on the Bengali nation and the language. The literati by staking a claim on the history of Bengal could create a sense of community where Muslim-ness was not in opposition to being a Bengali, exemplified by the use of the language. Here we see a marked difference in the way the Bengali Muslim literati approaches Islam and the Bengali language and culture as compared to *Koo Riti Barjan*.

*Koo Riti Barjan* was concerned with certain Bengali words, whereas, *Islam Darshan* wanted to claim Bengali culture for the Muslims. Bengali Muslims had stayed away from the origins of modern Bengali literature in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since the early twentieth century was marked by immense competition in the field of politics and education, the Bengali Muslim literati felt the need to create a modern literature through which they could be at equal footing with their Hindu counterparts. Moreover, through adopting a modern literary style, the literati helped to dispel the backwardness of the Muslim community.

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[127] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 185-1947*, 83.

[128] Dhurjati Prasad De*, Bengal Muslims in Search of Social Identity 1905-1947* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1998), 54-55.

While one is tempted to believe that Bengali Muslim solidarity was being conceived of in response to Hindu misrepresentations of their culture, *Islam Darshan* reveals the inner dynamics of the community that led to this solidarity. The editors criticized other religious periodicals not only for their sectarian and limited perspective, but also their "incapability of representing Islam as a universal religion." These magazines took an "anti–Sunni stance… weakening the universal brotherhood which only the Sunni's can represent," the editors of *Islam Darshan* argued.[129] *Islam Darshan* made a claim to be the true representatives of Islam. The sectarian conflict within the Muslim community prompted different groups to claim true representation for the community. The contest over legitimate authority created the need to interpret religion and language through which the identity of the community had to be asserted.[130] *Islam Darshan*'s claim to represent the perspectives of a particular group sheds light on the internal divisions that existed among various Muslim groups represented by their respective *anjumans*. The Sunnis who were a majority in Bengal were further subdivided into the Hannafi and Mohammadis. Both the groups differed on the issue of interpretations of the Koran and Hadith. While the Anjumane Waizine Bangla under the leadership of Abu Bakr believed in the "free interpretation of Koran and Hadith in the light of analogical reasoning,"[131] the Mohammadis under Anjumane Ahle-Hadith wanted to go back to the first *umma* of the Prophet and restore the original simplicity and purity

[129] Editorial, *Islam Darshan*, 1st year Boishakh (April-May), 1920), 3.

[130] Here I am drawing from Pandey's conceptualization of a contest over legitimate authority that created the need to narrativize events in order to give them a history. See Gyanendra Pandey, *Construction of Communalism*, 151.

[131] Ashoke Chakraborty, *Bengali Muslim Literati*, 32.

of faith and practice.[132] Since the majority of Muslims in Bengal claimed adherence to the Hannafi sect, *Islam Darshan* by appealing to them could craft majority support. The claims of legitimacy were grafted on majoritarianism. The Bengali Muslim identity was shaped not only in response to Hindu misrepresentation, but through protracted internal conflict among various sects.

In one of the essays titled *Samajer Katha* (Perspectives on Society) Habibur Rahaman, a reformist and member of the Anjumane Waizine, provides a vision of Bengali Muslim identity. He compares the Muslim society to an "ailing patient" in need of change and improvement.[133] In order to improve the Muslim society "the need of the hour is to explain every tenet of Koran and Hadith in a scientific manner", Habibur Rahman asserts.[134] While *Koo Riti Barjan* just refers to Koran and Hadith as guidelines for everyday practices and religious beliefs, *Islam Darshan* is aware that "just by reference to Koran and Hadith the educated Muslims will not find it reasonable" to abide by prescriptions of what constitutes a Bengali Muslim, the editor of the periodical reminds the reader.[135] What we see hear is that the claim to scientificity is totally absent in the pedagogic instructions meant for Muslim masses through cheaply printed vernacular texts like *Koo Riti Barjan*. Interestingly the writer points out "even if there is a discrepancy in the teachings of Koran and scientific philosophy, do not consider it to be wrong." Rather, he argues, "scientific temper itself proclaims that nothing belongs to the realm of ultimate truth…all discoveries are subject to revision according to scientific

[132] Dhurjati Prasad De, *Bengal Muslims in Search of Social Identity*, 15.

[133] Habibur Rahaman, 'Samajer Katha', in *Islam Darshan*, 1st year (Boishakh (April-May)), 30.

[134] Ibid., 30.

[135] Ibid., 30.

measures."[136] A religious claim is made through scientificity, but science and reason is made vulnerable on its own grounds. According to Rahaman, "the present verdict of science is not unchangeable and that is the principle of scientificity."[137] His logic follows a modular form of rationality in order to legitimize itself and in doing so also retains the absolute truth in the teachings of the Koran.

In addition to preaching religion in a scientific manner the biggest concern for these writers was the lack of Bengali translation of Islamic texts. Habibur Rahaman considers it a matter of "shame and lament" that no simple translation of the Koran in Bengali exists. Although people like Maulvi Naimmuddin, Maulvi Ruhul Amin and others have done some translations they were mostly incomplete. For Rahaman it was a "surprise" that the only complete translation of the Koran has been done by Girish Chandra, who belonged to the Brahmo Samaj.[138] Girish Chandra Sen's complete translation was in the context of religious synthesis attempted by Brahmo Samaj. Their interest in Islam reflected the Brahmo vision but lacked mass appeal.[139] Moreover, Sen wrote in Sanskritized Bengali, the language employed by Hindu writers, with a sparse use of Islamic terms. In contrast, the unfinished work of Naimmudin was directed towards the Bengali-speaking Muslim population. Naimmudin wanted to make the Koran available to the Muslim masses of Bengal who had no knowledge of Arabic and Persian.

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[136] Habibur Rahaman, 'Samajer Katha', 31.

[137] Ibid.

[138] The Brahmo Samaj formed in 1828, gave concrete expression Rammohun Roy's concept of Universal Theism. The Samaj believed in a Hindu monotheist tradition and gave importance to scriptural knowledge. It played a significant role in reforming Bengali society in the late-nineteenth century. But its appeal was limited to the educated Bengali Hindus.

[139] Sufia M Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 88.

It was not a work of high Islamic scholarship, but meant for the ordinary masses.[140] The lack of Islamic texts in Bengali made it difficult for the Muslims to claim a literary tradition in the vernacular. Aware of this acute lack of Muslim heritage in Bengali, Rahaman "expect[ed] some Muslim *zamindar* [landlord] or Western-educated Muslim to patronize a Bengali translation to erase this shame."[141]

The Muslim literati were concerned with translating certain key texts of Islam in Bengali for "it will revolutionize Bengali language."[142] They were of the opinion that since most Hindus did not respect Muslim journals, it is incumbent on the Muslim community's literate "to create a modern Muslim literary tradition and a readership for such literature."[143] Muslims according to them did not lack the capability to create modern literature, for novels like *Palli-Samsar*, *Akarshan*, *Anwara*, *Milan* (written by Muslims) can be "equally compared with the finest of novels written by Hindu novelists."[144] They urged the educated to popularize these novels. While these works made a general contribution to Bengali literature, "there has been a decline in the appreciation of religious texts, biographies and history, which is not a good sign."[145] Men like Nazir Ahmad and Mohammad Reyajuddin Ahmad who regularly contributed to *Al-Eslam*, a journal published in the 1920s, were skeptical of the genre of novels.[146] Although educated Bengali Muslims appreciated some novels by Muslim writers, there

[140] Sufia M Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, 111-113.

[141] Habibur Rahaman, 'Samajer Katha,' in *Islam Darshan*, 1st year Boishakh (April-May), 31.

[142] Ibid., 32.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid., 32.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Mustapha Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion*, 140.

was a general debate as to whether the influence of novels was good for the Muslim society. Contemporaries of *Islam Darshan* blamed novels for corrupting the youth with "bad thoughts and evil desires". They considered the genre as a "contagious disease and wrote that the "poison from novels" was rendering Muslim society "absolutely weak and exhausted." Since the goal of creating a Muslim literature was not to mime the aesthetics of Hindu literary styles, novels came in for a general condemnation.[147] *Islam Darshan* took a more moderate stance mentioning, "only building a dreamland of novels cannot hold the Muslim society together."[148] To create a distinct Muslim literary tradition in Bengali emphasis was given on history, biography, essays and theological writings. The reformers hoped such a literature would contribute towards the general upliftment of society.[149] Through efforts to create a distinct literary heritage for the Muslims, they claimed to become part of the Bengali language and Bengali culture. The literati defined the Bengali Muslim community "by its territoriality and at the same time by temporality."[150] I have used this phrase following Gyanendra Pandey's discussion on how communities make history in the context of communalism in North India. Communities resisted colonialism by defining themselves in terms of 'our territory, our *qasba*, our village'. In addition to this, genealogies, fictional and non-fictional writings created a history to underline the temporal axis by which the local community 'defined itself and projected its image to others'.[151]

[147] Mustapha Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion*, 139-140.

[148] Habibur Rahaman, 'Samajer Katha,' 32.

[149] Ashoke Chakraborty, *Bengali Muslim Literati*, 17.

[150] Gyanendra Pandey, *Construction of Communalism*, 110.

[151] Ibid., 111.

We see a dissonance between *Islam Darshan* and *Koo Riti Barjan* in the ways the texts sought to define the Bengali Muslim identity. While the clergy claimed Bengali to be their mother tongue, Arabic and Persian still found pride of place because Islamic texts were written in these languages. They urged the rural folks to strive towards learning these languages in order to become true Muslims.[152] On the contrary, *Islam Darshan* was prescribing to create an Islamic tradition in Bengali. The literati criticized the clergy for failing to understand the need for creating a Muslim literary tradition in Bengali. *Islam Darshan* rebuked them for thinking "madrasa schooling was the end of education."[153] They were considered "narrow-minded" with no inclination to learn national history, philosophy, science and other related subjects. In order to make the community modern, the literati suggested a host of texts with which the clergy should acquaint themselves to broaden their horizon of knowledge.[154]

Apart from creating an Islamic literary heritage in Bengali, the literati were involved in making this heritage a part of the history of Bengal. Abdul Gaffur Siddiqui, a Muslim member of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, in his essay, 'The History of Bengali Muslim Publication' notes, "although the Bengali Muslims number over fifty two percent and have given their heart and soul to this land, nobody has bothered to take notice of their contribution to Bengali language and literature."[155] He argues, "a couple of names like Hussain Shah, Abdul Hakim, etc., are not enough to comprehend the contribution of the Muslims." Sidddiqui laments that 'Muslims are still busy with Hindu

[152] Op.cit., 42.

[153] Habibur Rahaman, 'Samajer Katha,' in *Islam Darshan*, 1st year Boishakh (April-May), 31

[154] Ibid., 31.

[155] Abdul Gaffur Siddiqui, 'Bangiya Musalman Sanbadh Patrar Itihas,' in *Islam Darshan*, 1st year, 3rd edition, Asharh (June-July), 124.

litterateurs…and have diverted from the literary tradition of their Muslim forefathers."[156] One of the reasons for this contribution going unnoticed was the negative disposition towards Muslim literature in general by The Bangiya Sahitya Parishad- the apex body that shaped the Bengali language into a modern vernacular.

In 1872 John Beams had proposed to the institution of a Bengali Academy of Literature in order to consolidate the Bengali language into a "literary language" to make it at par with "other European languages". The academy was set up in 1893 and renamed Bangiya Shahitya Parishad in 1894.[157] The Parishad was committed to the project of forging a coherent national/linguistic identity. An avowed purpose of the Parishad was to reconstruct a history for the Bengalis through the building of a Bengali literary canon by recovering texts, archiving them and disseminating them through publications.[158]

Siddiqui was displeased with the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad regarding their attitude towards Bengali Muslims' role in literature. He had mentioned his displeasure to his friend Byomkesh Mustaphi, an "eminent Hindu litterateur." Byomkesh suggested that one way to overcome this was to form a united front of Bengali Muslim literati and force the Parishad to acknowledge Bengali Muslim contribution. It was easier said than done for "it is not their [Muslims] own doing" that the Parishad failed to notice their contribution.[159] The Parishad was "highly cloyed with Hindu tastes and ideals" and even

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[156] Abdul Gaffur Siddiqui, 'Bangiya Musalman Sanbadh Patrar Itihas,' 125.

[157] Gautam Bhadra and Deepa De, 'Chintar Chalachitra: Bangiya Shahitya Parishat (BS1300-1330)', *Shaitya Parisat Patrika* (BS 1401-2), reprinted *Ababhas*, 2 (April, 2002), 41-43.

[158] Swapan Chakravorty, 'Purity and Print: A Note on Nineteenth-Century Bengali Prose,' in Abhijit Gupta and Swapan Chakravorty (ed.) *Print Areas: Book History in India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 213.

[159] Abdul Gaffur Siddiqui, 'Bangiya Musalman Sanbadh Patrar Itihas,' 126.

campaigned to oust Islamic words commonly used by Hindu and Bengali writers to completely Sanskritize Bengali.[160]

Seeing the intransigence of the Parishad, the editors of *Islam Darshan* and other literati entrusted Siddiqui with a two-fold task of compiling all available writings in *Mussalmani-Bangla*[161] and to make a compendium of all periodicals, published by Bengali Muslims for their society. Byomkesh had noted, "if ever one needs to write a true history of Bengali language, then the contribution of Mussalmani-Bangla and Bengali Muslim mouthpieces will form a large part of the history."[162]

Abdul Gaffur Siddiqui's efforts in compiling a history of 'Mussalamni Bangla' literature is important in the light of claiming a distinct Muslim tradition in Bengali without calling for a linguistic separation between the Hindus and Muslims.[163] Afia Dil has pointed to a dialect variation in Bengali that correlates with religious identification between Hindus and Muslims. According to her "this communal dialect variation cuts across other lines of social dialect differences in that Muslim features…may be shared by Bengalees of different regional origins belonging to different socio-economic status."[164] Tracing the history of the Bengali language in the Middle Bengali period, the period of Muslim rule in Bengal roughly between 1204 CE to 1764 CE, she points to Muslim patronization of the Bengali language. Prior to Muslim rule the Brahmins dominated

[160] Dhurjati Prasad De, *Bengal Muslims in Search of Social Identity*, 57-62.

[161] It referred to a particular trend in the writings of Muslim poets since the middle of eighteenth century. Lacking the literary merits of modern Bengali, it was written in a form of Bengali, which had an abundance of Arabic and Persian words.

[162] Abdul Gaffur Siddiqui, 'Bangiya Musalman Sanbadh Patrar Itihas,' 126.

[163] Afia Dil, *Two Traditions of the Bengali Languag*e (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1993), 14.

[164] Ibid., 16. Linguistics refers to communal dialect as one that is based on religion and cuts across both horizontally and vertically. Bengalees are the Bengali- speaking natives of Bengal.

Bengal and Sanskrit was the language of the courts and the elite Hindus. In order to undermine the dominance of Sanskrit and Brahmins, the Muslim rulers commissioned works in Bengali. Both Hindu and Muslim scholars patronized by the court used the same language.[165]

Due to the Muslim presence from the very beginning literary works[166] in Bengali were infused with Persian and Arabic words. These words in Bengali literature initially appeared in the writings of the Hindu poets. But by the fourteenth century Muslim writers in Bengali started to use them. This type of Bengali continued to be used in Bengal, both among the general masses and the writers till the advent of literary prose in the nineteenth century, which was highly Sanskritized-a result of British language policy.[167]

Dil's insightful study of the development and growth of Bengali language can be used to argue that it was a product of Muslim cultural heritage. What the Bengali Hindus claimed to be their language was in effect a Sanskritized version far removed from the dialects of the common Bengali people, which was infused with Perso-Arabic vocabulary. The historical history of the Bengali language cannot be separated from its Muslim presence. The Bengali Muslim literati in the 1920s worked towards claiming this Muslim history of the Bengali language. By claiming the Muslim-ness of the language, the Bengali speaking Muslims became an integral part of the Bengali language and her history.

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[165] Afia Dil, *Two Traditions of the Bengali Languag*e, 24.

[166] By Literary works I mean different styles of verse form. Bengali prose developed in the colonial period.

[167] Afia Dil, *Two Traditions of the Bengali Languag*e, 53-72.

**Summary**

I began the chapter with an analysis of a text written for an audience not well versed either in Islamic principles in accordance with the Koran and Hadith or Bengali society and culture represented through Bengali language. The author set to define a Bengali Muslim community that bridged Islamic ideology and Bengali culture. The pedagogic text argued for the Islamization of the rural masses in their religious and social conduct. A primary concern was whether Bengali language could become a cultural component of Muslim-ness. This stemmed from the assumption that Islamic ideology with its extra-territorial symbolism was in opposition to Bengali language, which was local and territorial. The rural clergy who were authoring such texts while giving justification for the use of Bengali as a language for social conduct still held on to the learning of Persian, Arabic or Urdu as markers of an Islamic identity. What we find here is a relative failure to make Bengali as a cultural component of being a Muslim.

In an attempt to reconcile Bengali-ness with being a Muslim, a new class of authors well versed with modern Bengali literary culture, attempted to articulate a Bengali Muslim identity which could claim to be territorial as well as Islamic. My analysis of *Islam Darshan* focused on their contribution towards creating a cultural and religious identity for the Bengali Muslim community. Scholars like Asim Roy have termed them as 'cultural mediators' and have acknowledged them for upholding "Bengali language as the exclusive medium for the Bengali Muslim social and cultural communication."[168] Roy's understanding is grounded on the assumption that for the cultural mediators "the fabric of Muslim Bengali culture rested on the twin pillars of

[168] Asim Roy, 'Being and Becoming a Muslim: A Historiographic Perspective on the Search for Muslim Identity in Bengal,' in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.) *Bengal: Rethinking History, Essays in Historiography* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 225.

Islam and local Bengali culture."[169] Contrary to Roy's reading my analysis reveals that the literati sought to redefine 'local' by creating a Muslim literature and literary culture in the Bengali language. Through their efforts in writing a genealogy of Muslim thought and religious ideology in the vernacular they sought to redefine 'local' as part of the Islamic heritage. For these writers the local was never antithetical to Islam, rather the local was very much part of Muslim history. These writers worked to reveal that Bengali language was an inalienable part of being a Muslim, and they did this by creating an Islamic cultural tradition in Bengali. By claiming a 'local' history for the Muslims, they could bridge the ideological and cultural divide of being a Bengali Muslim.

This chapter has made a conscious effort to not read the emergence of a Bengali Muslim identity as the other of a Bengali Hindu identity. In my reading I have tried to delineate the varying conceptions of what it meant to be a Bengali Muslim from the perspective of the clergy and the literati. I have also articulated the shifting terrain of the other. In our analysis the Muslim other was at times within the community. For the clergy the other was the western-educated Muslim, and for the literati the orthodoxy of the clergy was a hindrance towards achieving the coherence of a community. While not denying that these writings were open to appropriation along communal lines, these texts are also very helpful in revealing the discourses adopted by the Bengali Muslim community to negotiate their Islamic identity with the Bengali language. Such an approach is more fruitful then merely considering theses texts as a source for identifying Hindu and Muslim communal formations.

[169] Asim Roy, 'Being and Becoming a Muslim: A Historiographic Perspective on the Search for Muslim Identity in Bengal,' 218.

## Chapter III

## Elite Conception of Muslim Community

In the previous chapter I delineated the process through which the Bengali Muslim literati claimed the Bengali language as part of the Islamic heritage and culture. They argued that the Bengali language was a product of Muslim cultural heritage and worked toward claiming a Muslim history of the Bengali language. For the Bengali Muslim literati, identity formation centered on Bengali language was a response to Bengali literature written by Hindus that fostered a sense of belonging to Bengal in which the Muslims were repeatedly excluded. Hindu authors writing in Bengali stereotyped Muslims as aliens and outsiders to Bengal. In order to remedy the situation the Bengali speaking Muslim literati sought to recreate a Muslim literature in Bengali to lay claims to the language and the province of Bengal. The literati by staking a claim on the history of Bengal could create a sense of community where Muslim-ness was not in opposition to being a Bengali, exemplified by the use of the language. Their efforts were directed in situating Bengali language within Islamic cultural heritage. For the Bengali Muslim literati, Bengali language belonged as much to the Muslims as to the Hindus.

Alongside the Bengali Muslim literati, concerned with the identity of the vast majority of Bengali speaking Muslims, there existed in Bengal a small population of English-educated Urdu-speaking Muslim social elite. These Muslim elites or *ashrafs* who claimed foreign descent were culturally and linguistically very different from their Bengali-speaking co-religionists. Although the *ashrafs* have been living in Bengal for

centuries since the beginning of Muslim rule, they retained a culture "inspired by the Persianized courts of Delhi and Lucknow."[170] A few of the *ashraf* families were wealthy landlords like the Nawabs of Dacca and Murshidabad and some like Nawab Abdul Latif and Ameer Ali served in the British administrative system. Men like Abdul Latif and Ameer Ali emphasized the need for English education for the Muslim masses. Abdul Latif remarked, "if any language in India could lead to the advancement in the life of the learner, it is English," and "the political benefits of the education of the Mahommendans in English…are many and apparent."[171] In a similar vein the Presidential address of a Provincial Mohammedan Educational Conference held in Calcutta in 1911 stated, "the process of producing moral and intellectual wealth is that of mass education. The need for mass education is both urgent and immediate."[172] The remark on education as the basis of moral and intellectual progress, "political advancement," and "national regeneration" becomes significant because the elites were conceiving of a Muslim identity whose core was perceived in English education. This was a significant departure from the Bengali Muslim literati's emphasis on Bengali as an integral part of Muslim identity. While the Bengali Muslim literati emphasized on the Bengali language, the elites focused on the need for learning English, to reshape the Bengali Muslim identity. Both the elites and the Bengali speaking literati were staking claim on leadership to reshape the Bengali Muslim identity, because "on their success depends the future well-

[170] Kenneth McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918 to 1935* (Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), 10.

[171] Abdul Latif, *A Minute on the Hoogly Mudrussah* (Calcutta: Suburban Municipal Press, 1877), 3. Nawab Abdul Latif founded the Mahomedan Literary Society at Calcutta in 1864. The society worked toward encouraging Muslims to get English education, conveying the grievances of the Muslims to the British government and helped to mobilize Muslim public opinion.

[172] *The Mussalman*, October 13, 1911.

being of the community."[173] In order to seek a distinct status and secure the growth of the community, why did the elites give importance to English and not Bengali language in articulating a Bengali Muslim identity? What was the nature of Muslim identity the elites sought to create through association with English language? These questions will form the basis of this chapter.

The Muslim elite downplayed ethnic identity markers, and chose the language of the colonial masters for the political advancement and national regeneration of the Muslims.[174] In order to understand the emphasis on English language, and the extent to which it was instrumental in creating a new cultural identity for the Muslims we need to focus our attention on the social conditions of Muslims during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

The revolt of 1857 brought a momentous shift in the life of Muslim elites.[175] For the Muslim elites, the official proclamation of British rule in India following 1857, led to "the destruction of a way of life."[176] As long as the Mughals remained in power the Muslim aristocrats had a sense of pride of being part of the ruling class. Although by mid-eighteenth century the country was run by the British East India Company, the elites considered them as an occupying force only, because they were still very much part of

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[173] *The Mussalman*, 'The forthcoming Conference at Burdwan,' November 17, 1911.

[174] The Muslim elites sought to speak on behalf of the Muslim population of India, and doing so they were aware, it would take into consideration the needs and interest of the Bengali Muslim community too. The Muslim elites did not see the Bengali Muslims as a distinct community different from other Muslims of India. I discuss below the reasons why the elites gave emphasis to a singular Muslim identity, rather than focus on territorial specificity in defining Muslim-ness.

[175] 1857 witnessed a serious military mutiny and civilian uprisings which, for a fleeting moment, threatened to bring British rule to an end exactly one hundred years after the first colonial conquest in Bengal. In the aftermath of the revolt, India transitioned from Company rule to Crown Raj. And the beginning of the Raj also meant new techniques of governance and administration.

[176] Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 34.

the administrative machinery. The Muslims still held on to offices in the various departments of the government.[177] Post-1857, "in the British view it was Muslim intrigue and Muslim leadership that converted a sepoy mutiny into a political conspiracy aimed at the extinction of the British Raj."[178] Although not all Muslims participated in the 1857 revolt mutiny, in the eyes of the British, the entire Muslim community became a rebel and a "chronic danger to the British power in India."[179]

In addition to loss of power, the Muslim elites faced a double blow when the British changed from Persian to English as the language of administration in 1837. This resulted in the slow loss of employment for Muslims in government service. The decision on the part of the British had different effects on the Hindus and Muslims. The Muslim reluctance to learning English was advantageous to Hindus who had made great progress in English education through the Hindu and Sanskrit Colleges. The proportion of the Muslim community which once enjoyed "the monopoly of the government" fell to "less than one twenty-third, of the whole administrative body in gazetted appointments."[180] By the 1870s the situation deteriorated further, and the ratio of Muslims to Hindus in the lower ranks of office was 1:120.[181]

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[177] Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* 36-38.

[178] Thomas R. Metcalfe, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857-1870* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), 289.

[179] WW Hunter, *The Indian Mussalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (Lahore: Premier Book House, reprinted from 1871 edition, 1974), 3.

[180] Ibid., 162.

[181] Tanzeen M. Murshid, *The Sacred and The Secular: Bengali Muslim Discourses, 1871-1977* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47.

In view of the deplorable condition of the Muslims of Bengal, the Muslim elites considered "state employment as the keystone of Muslim prosperity."[182] Ameer Ali along with Abdul Latif favored the introduction of English education among the Muslims by the British government.[183] To Ali "every hope of regeneration of India now depends on the spread of English education and the diffusion of Western ideas through the medium of the English language. A thorough knowledge of the English language and literature is now the only way to preferment and honour."[184] Muslim elites like Ameer Ali associated the Muslim identity with honor and power. Unlike the Bengali Muslim literati which worked toward creating a Muslim heritage of Bengali language in order to claim a Muslim history for the Bengalis, Ameer Ali did not conceive of a Muslim identity in regional or 'local' terms. The Muslim identity was coterminous with "a race of conquerors, who not more than a hundred years ago possessed a monopoly of power and wealth."[185]

The revolt of 1857 had shattered the pride and honor of this 'race of conquerors'. The British came down upon the Muslims with a vengeance. The last Mughal emperor,

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[182] Ameer Ali, 'A Cry from the Indian Muslims,' *The Nineteenth Century*, Aug 1882, vol. xii, pp 193-215, in Syed Razi Wasti (ed.) *Memoirs and Other Writings of Syed Ameer Ali* (Lahore: People's Publishing House, 1968), 170.

[183] Ameer Ali (1849-1928), was a important Muslim figure of colonial India. He was a modernizer of Islam and spokesman for the Muslim community. He directed his efforts in the late-nineteenth century to create a pan-Indian Muslim identity. His *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teaching of Mohammad* (1873) and *The Spirit of Islam* (1891) had a deep impact on the minds of the English educated Muslims. Widely read by the English in London, Ali identified Islam with progress and wrote to show that it was a religion which had a modern outlook. He was the founder of the Central National Mohammedan Association, a platform for promoting Muslim interests, and a judge of the Calcutta High Court. For a brief biography see Jayanti Maitra, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1855-1906* (Calcutta: KP Bagchi and Company, 1984), 138-139. This chapter will substantially draw on the writings of Ameer Ali, to sketch a vision of Muslim identity envisaged by the Muslim elites.

[184] Ameer Ali, 'A Cry from the Indian Muslims,' *The Nineteenth Century*, Aug 1882, vol. xii, pp 193-215, in Syed Razi Wasti (ed.) *Memoirs and Other Writings of Syed Ameer Ali* (Lahore: People's Publishing House, 1968), 170.

[185] Ibid., 170.

Bahadur Shah Zafar was tried and exiled to Rangoon. Some of the Mughal princes were shot, and some tired and executed. Old Muslim families who lived with pride and prestige prior to the revolt suffered disastrously. In most cases the British confiscated their properties and they were reduced to begging. Furthermore, the "well-to-do middle class-the section which forms the backbone of a nation" had become extinct among the Muslims.[186] Reporting on the deep trauma felt by the Muslims at the loss of wealth and honor, *The Muhammadan Observer* wrote, "Muhammadans of the middle class were left to chew their stale crumbs or to transform themselves, which however, for the suddenness of change in their fortune and the fright of a possibly worse future, was an impossibility."[187]

The elites were aware that changing the Muslim situation would be 'an impossibility' without the help of special patronage from the British government. In return of special privileges to ameliorate the condition of the Muslims, the Muslim elites of Bengal professed loyalty to the British crown. Historians who read Muslim loyalty to the British as a deterrent to a unified struggle of the Indian population against British rule fail to contextualize the situation. Supporting the British to advance the Muslim community was a bargaining strategy of the elites in view of the attitude of the Hindu leaders against the Muslims. The Muslim elites were not against self-government, but it could only happen when the "diverse races, creeds and nationalities had thoroughly learned the value of compromise and toleration in the management of public services."[188]

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[186] 'Memorial of the National Muhammadan Association', Feb 1882, in KK Aziz (ed.), *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work Vol II*, 34.

[187] *The Muhammadan Observer*, 'Muhammadan Education and Government Employment,' September 13, 1894.

**Reshaping Bengali Muslim identity through English language**

In order to ameliorate the conditions of the Muslims Ameer Ali in 1877 founded the National Muhammadan Association (NMA) at Calcutta. The association was the oldest organization among Indian Muslims, "for their political, social and material advancement."[189] It was founded on a "strict and loyal adherence to the crown."[190] The association proposed to work in "harmony with Western culture and the progressive tendencies of the age. It also sought the "political regeneration" of Muslims by a "moral revival and constant endeavors, attempts to obtain from government, a recognition of their just and reasonable claims."[191]

The NMA was the first Muslim association, which explicitly spoke about the 'political advancement' of the Muslims. The first step towards this was to petition the government for improving the Muslim representation in government employment. In view of this situation the government reserved jobs for the Muslims in public service employments. The British government passed a resolution in 1885, which directed provincial governments to employ suitable candidates from the Muslim community in departments where there were no Muslims at all. Since the social conditions of the Muslims was in a state of transition and their rate of progress was slower than the Hindus, most elite Muslims thought it is "evidently a mistake when selecting candidates

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[188] *The Times*, 'Presidential Address to the Muslim League Delhi Session: 29 January 1910,' January 31, 1910, in KK Aziz (ed.), *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work Vol II*, 330.

[189] *The Mussalman*, 'Central National Mohammedan Association Annual Meeting,' May 5, 1911.

[190] Ibid.

[191] *The Mussalman*, 'Central National Mohammedan Association Annual Meeting,' May 5, 1911.

for employment to insist on an uniform education standard for all classes."[192] When the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, had questioned the special considerations for Muslims, and demanded open competitive examination for all public services, elite Muslims emphasized on the backwardness of the community to make a case for special consideration.[193] In the eyes of the Muslim elites political advancement and 'social regeneration' could only happen by gaining a strong representation in government employment. They understood that if Muslims were in government, they would acquire honor and limited power, which can be used to further the interest of the community. Since being part of the administration was necessary to convey Muslim interest to the British government, one can understand why the NMA insisted on loyalty to the crown.

In order to contextualize the elite conception of Muslim identity formation, we need to know how their vision was received by the Bengali Muslim literati who also claimed to be leaders of the Muslim community. The Bengali Muslim literati sharply criticized the obstinate resistance shown by the Muslim elites of Bengal towards the Bengali language. Writing in the Bengali press, some mentioned, "no matter whether your forefathers came form Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan or Turkey…we are now Bengalis."[194] According to the Bengali Muslim literati, "the urban Bengali Muslim leaders are merely trying to perform the impossible", for "it is no more possible to stop the prevalence of Bengali in Bengali Muslim society, than it is "to turn back the Ganges

[192] *The Muslim Chronicle*, 'The Employment of Mussulmans,' September 26, 1908.

[193] Jayanti Maitra, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1855-1906* (Calcutta: K P Bagchi & Company, 1984), 163-166.

[194] Hamid Ali, 'Uttar Banger Musalman Sahitya,' *Basana*, 2nd year, Boishakh (April-May), 1909, in Mustapha Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion as reflected in the Bengali Press 1901-1930* (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1973), 228.

to its Himalayan source."[195] The Bengali Muslim literati were unanimous in defending the importance of Bengali for the Bengali Muslim population. They argued that by virtue of birthplace and language Bengali Muslim were Bengalis.[196]

We see two different approaches in articulating the Bengali Muslim identity. While the Bengali Muslim literati stressed on local culture, the elites spoke of a homogenous Muslim only identity, which was demanding empowerment on 'just and reasonable' grounds. The elite strategy of moving away from territorial markers (such as Bengali language), has led many historians to conclude that although they belong "to a large section of the Muslim leadership in Bengal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who worked in Bengal but could not be said to be of Bengal or the Bengalis in *any significant sense* [emphasis mine].[197] Writing on Ameer Ali, the historian Leonard Gordon informs us that "Ali had a sense of Indian and Muslim identity, but not a Bengali identity."[198] A conscious decision to not identify with the Bengali language in any significant sense cannot be attributed to lack of concern for the Bengali Muslims. The

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[195] Syed Emdad Ali, 'Matri Bhasa o Bangiya Musalman', *Naba Nur*, 1st year, 9th issue, Paus (Dec-Jan) in Mustapha Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion*, 228.

[196] Much later the language question became an important factor in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.The Partition of the subcontinent saw the birth of two new nation-states- India and Pakistan with two wings, East and West separated by over 800 miles. East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh gained her independence in 1971. The mother tongue of the majority population in East Pakistan was Bengali. When the partition of the subcontinent took place in 1947, the colonial state of Bengal was divided into West Bengal, which remained with India, and the majority Muslim provinces to the east, became the eastern provinces of Pakistan. Since the majority of the pre-dominantly Muslim population spoke Bengali in East Pakistan, they resisted the use of Urdu, which was the official language of Pakistan. The concern for a linguistic identity of the Bengali speaking Muslim population of East Pakistan, was one of the factors that contributed to the creation of Bangladesh. The language issue fed into the web of growing discontent among East Pakistani Muslims regarding the lack of effective electoral processes and the demand for more autonomy in local administration. See Anwar and Afia Dil, *Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh* (Lahore: Ferozsons (Pvt) Ltd, 200), 80-85, 181.

[197] Leonard Gordon, Bengal: *The Nationalist Movement, 1876-1940* (New York, London: Columbia University Press, 1974), 73.

[198] Ibid., 73.

elite leadership did not want to reclaim the space of Bengali language for the Muslims, because the Bengali Muslim literati have already done that work. The task at hand for the elites was to move beyond parochial identities and project a modernist Islam that was cosmopolitan in nature. As mentioned earlier, the elites associated Muslim identity with honor and power. For them the "political dominance of Islam was intrinsic to the logic of civilization" and "Islamic heritage was political power."[199] Seeing themselves as repositories of Mughal *sharif* culture, "there was a fundamental unwillingness to compromise on the premise that Indian Muslims, as Muslims, were endowed with an unqualified right to power."[200]

In view of such an understanding of the Muslim community, the elites were concerned with empowering the community by demanding special representation in public services. The Muslim elites, used their position as 'natural leaders', to bargain special representation in public services to empower the community.[201] The strategy to support the British in lieu of special privileges to the Muslims, should not be read as Muslim subservience to British rule. The way the Muslim elites worded their demands provide for a different understanding of Muslim status. The Muslim elites considered the demand for empowerment as 'just and reasonable claims' because they wanted the British and Hindus to think that "the Mohammedans are their equals and that they are not

[199] Farzana Sheikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 117.

[200] Ibid., 114.

[201] British relied upon intermediaries to rule India. The British considered these intermediaries as 'natural leaders' and rewarded them with special status, such as honorary magistracies in local institutions. For a detailed discussion on intermediaries and natural leaders, see Christopher A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the age of British Expansion 170-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India,' in Eric Hobswam and Terence Ranger (ed.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 165-210, and Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 56-60.

to be despised or overlooked as beings of an inferior order."[202] Drawing on the rhetoric of 'just and reasonable claims', the Muslims were engaging with the British as equals.. According to the elites, the Muslim community had an honorable position in history, as not long ago they were the ruling class. They demanded that honor and respect for the community from the British rulers. The attempt of the elites in reshaping the Muslim identity was to secure an honorable place for the Indian Muslims in the subcontinent.[203] It was also a move to resist classification of Muslims as "either decadent nawabs or illiterate, fanatical masses."[204]

The primary concern for representation in public services was to reclaim an equal status for the Muslims, but at the same time it was motivated due to the intransigence of the Hindu community. The Muslims could not get a foothold in public service not because of their backwardness and general poverty that had gripped them after the revolt of 1857, but also due to the fact that "Hindus want total ostracism of Mussalmans from all share in the service and patronage of the country."[205] Although plenty of qualified Muslims existed, "these Muhammadans have no power, or influence to get them in, against a Babu minority which has monopolized the machinery of local boards, and goes solid for its own friends on every occasion."[206] In view of the systematic ostracism of Muslims in administration due to the nepotism of Bengali Hindus, the elite Muslims

[202] *The Mussalman*, 'Special Representation and the Mussalmans,' June 23, 1911.

[203] Blair B. King, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances of Bengal, 1859-1862* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), 8.

[204] Margrit Pernau, 'Middle Class and Secularization: The Muslims of Delhi in the Nineteenth Century,' in Imtiaz Ahmed and Helmut Reifeld (ed.), *Middle Class Values in India and Western Europe* (New Delhi: Social Science Press-Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2001), 22.

[205] *The Muhammadan Observer*, 'Inspector-Generalship of Registration,' June 21, 1894.

[206] *The Muhammadan Observer*, 'Muhammadans and the Education Department,' August 9, 1894. Babu in colonial Bengal was a generic term used for Hindu clerks in various administrative departments.

where trying to use their positions of power to influence the British to bargain a better future for their co-religionists. The elite strategy for bargaining was to overcome the backwardness of Muslims and also prevent the Hindus from gaining control over all administrative sections. The elite Muslims were aware that "adequate representation in the public services is as necessary to the progress and prosperity of the community as an equal share in the representation of political bodies," because these administrative offices served as platforms to articulate the needs and interests of the Muslim community.[207] Although Hindu machinations were a hindrance, the Muslim elites emphasized the need for English education because without it the community would not succeed, in their estimation.

The social context of the period made the Muslim elites aware of the necessity to empower the community. They pitched for "adequate and effective representation of Mussalmans," in public services, because they wanted to play an "intelligent part in all civic affairs" of the country.[208] Belonging to an erstwhile ruling class, the elites knew the importance of good governance. They wanted to make the Muslim community effective and equal partners in the governance of the country. The community must have representatives in the echelons of power, to effectively promote the interest of the Muslims. The elites were trying to reshape the Muslim community through trajectories of power. The key to such power lay in becoming an integral part of the public services, which could be achieved through English education. One can infer that the emphasis on English language was a means to regain lost pride, project the Muslims as equals with

[207] Ameer Ali, 'Memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission, June 1928', in KK Aziz (ed.), *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work Vol II*, 513.

[208] *The Mussalman*, 'Special Representation and the Mussalmans,' June 23, 1911.

respect to the British and Hindus, counter negative images of the community, and establish the community as partners to provide effective governance for both Muslims and Hindus under British rule.

**Summary**

In the Muslim elites formulation of a Muslim identity, English was seen as an important identity marker. This is a significant shift from the perceptions of the Bengali Muslim literati who were against English. The problem lies in how one understands "fundamental commitments and questions of cultural identity that they bring with them."[209] From the above discussions we can assume that commitment to English became a cultural marker for the Muslims, at least in the ways the Muslim elite was seeking a moral regeneration of the community. Although the elites were unanimous in stressing the need for English, some still urged the learning of Persian and Arabic. Men like Abdul Latif while giving importance to English thought "unless a Mahomedan is a Persian and Arabic scholar…he can have no influence in Muslim society."[210] The point here is Abdul Latif considered such languages as fundamental markers of the community. For him the history and culture associated with Persian and Arabic was integral to being a Muslim. It can be said that his support for English was directed towards regaining the status of Muslims in the public domain where they lagged behind the Hindus. But to command respect among co-religionists, it was necessary to have knowledge of Arabic and Persian.

[209] Akeel Bilgrami, 'What is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity,' *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no 4, Identities (Summer, 1992), 840. I have borrowed Bilgrami's conceptual framework to make my argument in this section.

[210] Ibid.

In Abdul Latif's view, distinctiveness and honor or the community very much depended on certain markers considered as fundamental to being a Muslim.

On the other hand Ameer Ali equates English with the honor of the community. We find differing conceptions on what a Muslim or Muslim society should consider as fundamental commitment. In the case of Ameer Ali, he sought a "functional explanation of identity-forming functional commitments."[211] This is to say that certain commitments are to be understood as a function of historical, social, and material circumstances."[212] If we consider commitment to certain identity markers in a functional sense, we can argue that the need for Persian and Arabic has lapsed, and the historical context demands attention to English.[213] On the other hand commitment to Persian and Arabic, and aversion to English suggests a defensive function in self-identification. It assumes that if one abandons these markers, it amounts to "surrendering to the forces of West."[214] A failure to see through the "implications of opposition to English, amounts to an understanding of themselves (those who oppose it) as victims of Western domination, and constitutes a third-person perspective," that perpetuates these defensive actions.[215]

The point here is to critique an often repeated cliché that Muslim elites were loyal to the British because they wanted to dispel the fanatical image of the Muslim community that the British had conjured after the revolt of 1857. The emphasis on English for the

[211] Akeel Bilgrami, 'What is a Muslim?' 833.

[212] Ibid., 831.

[213] I am aware of the fact that Ameer Ali considered Urdu to be the language of the Muslims. But he was also categorical in stating that vernacular schools should be discontinued and the money should be used to establish English medium schools. By emphasis on Persian and Arabic is to explore the implications of what it means to hold on to certain commitments.

[214] Akeel Bilgrami, 'What is a Muslim?' 835.

[215] A third-person perspective is one, where you shape your identity in response to how others think of you.

moral regeneration and advancement of the Muslims suggests that they were able to challenge the notion of Muslim identity as a codifiable phenomenon, rigid, monolithic and out of sync with historical realities. A positive engagement with the British through English education was a strategy employed by the Muslim elites to ensure that the community partakes in the administrative affairs of the state. Only by having Muslims in positions of power was it possible to guide the interest of the community. English became the vehicle through which the elites sought to make the Muslims as partners in the governance of the country. The emphasis on English was to empower the community, to help them come out of a deep trauma that had supposedly gripped them after the loss of power. The Muslim elites foresaw the power of English in regaining the honor and pride of the community.

## Conclusion

In each of my three chapters I have used three different kinds of source materials – colonial census, vernacular tracts and periodicals, and English writings of Amir Ali and English newspapers run by the Muslim elite. These different archives have been read to illuminate the complex and often contradictory ways in which Bengali Muslim identity took shape. The census reports not merely counted, but also laid out implicit (or even explicit) discursive justifications on who would count as a Muslim and who would not. In so doing, such categories and the presuppositions on which such categories were founded inadvertently generated census-dictated conceptions of authentic Muslim-ness among the elites as well as the Muslim masses of Bengal. Most significantly, the colonial census generated the conditions of possibility whereby a bifurcation between Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness occurred and the two components came to be placed in an antithetical relationship.

In Chapter I, I have engaged in an extensive analysis of colonial census in order to point to the dynamic generated by the categorizations of census operations and the impact such operations had on consolidating and defining a Bengali Muslim identity. Chapter II, which deals with two very different kinds of vernacular texts from the 1920s share the commonality of addressing, albeit in markedly different ways, this tension between being a Bengali and a Muslim that was generated in response to the colonial census.

The pedagogical text advocating the Islamization of the rural masses, was concerned with the efficacy of Bengali language as a cultural component of Muslim-ness.

The text justified the use of Bengali language, but failed to cement it as central to Bengali Muslim identity. The dichotomy between being Bengali and Muslim could not find a successful resolution; despite justifications offered by the rural clergy for using Bengali instead of shunning it in favor of Urdu and Persian, the tension between Islamic heritage and Bengali culture could not be easily reconciled. It was the Bengali Muslim literati who seriously and successfully accomplished the task of reconciling the apparent contradictions between being a Bengali and being a Muslim. The writings analyzed in the journal published by the Bengali Muslim literati made a strong case for Bengali language as an inalienable component of Bengali Muslim identity (and community) by subsuming the history of Bengali language and culture within the narrative of history of Muslim rule in Bengal. Responding both to colonial knowledge of who qualified as a Muslim and the attacks made by Hindu writers who projected the Muslims as aliens and questioned their territorial integrity, the literati redefined the meaning of Bengali language.

Chapter III focuses on the English educated elites in order to show that for this section of the elite, Muslim identity was coterminous with the ruling class. In order to regain the honor of the community, they were concerned with empowering the Muslims by demanding special representation in public services and the propagation of English. Since modern education was an absolute necessity to seek representation in the government, the elites emphasized the need to acquire the knowledge of English. Post 1830s, Persian ceased to be the official language of India, and the elites quickly realized that in this changed scenario, English as the new language of power in the Raj was the key to the maintenance of social and political power. Thus they sought to articulate a

vision of Muslim community that was fluent in the language of power in order to restore the supposedly lost glory of the community.

Existing scholarship on Bengali Muslim identity formation has focused either on the formation of the rural public seen in the work of Rafiuddin Ahmed or emphasized the domain of elite, institutional realm of political parties[216] or literary forums.[217] In shedding light on the different versions of what constituted a Bengali Muslim identity for different social groups ( rural clergy, vernacular literati and the English-educated *ashrafs*), I am suggesting that a study of the different discursive claims about who or what is a Bengali Muslim in the nineteenth and early twentieth century is not only productive for generating an empirical narrative of Bengali Muslim identity formation, but also a theoretically productive move in accounting for the processes through which 'community' and, indeed, claims to represent the community assume a discursive centrality in the domain of the colonial public sphere. The historical fact that the techniques of colonial administration (like the census) reinforced the colonial conception of India as essentially comprised of a series of communities is not unrelated to the discursive centrality that the 'community' came to acquire as a legitimate source of social and political representation in colonial thought, policies, and practices;[218] this ultimately, set the terms in which political and cultural claims could be produced within the colonized society for any group or individual with hegemonic aspirations in public sphere.

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[216] See Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976).

[217] See Shahadat Khan, *The Freedom of Intellect (Buddhir Mukti Andolan) in Bengali Muslim Thought: 1926-1938* (Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

[218] Gyanendra, Pandey *Construction of Communalism* and Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social Intellectual History, 1890-1905* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

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